

The Sorcerer's Receptionist



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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

The Sorcerer's Receptionist



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Rockmann
(Alois Hades Arnold)

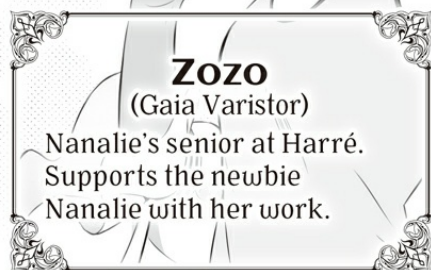
Nanalie's rival ever since her days at magic school. As Nanalie would say, he's of "a sort rarely seen in recent years, a HUGE womanizer." Even after getting her job, she still can't seem to get away from him...

Nanalie
(Persephone Hel).

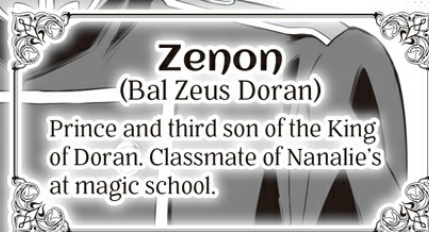
Has dreamed of being a "Receptionist Lady" at Harré from a young age. After graduating from magic school, she successfully gets the job. But it's not all fun and games!

Lala

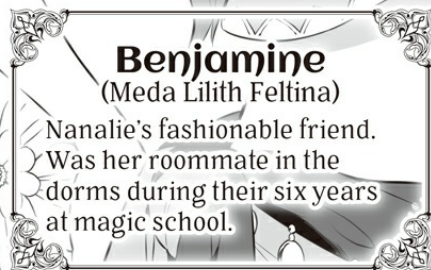
Nanalie's familiar. A Blanc Lycus, a type of magical animal that lives in cold regions and has white fur. She is a female wolf.



Zozo
(Gaia Varistor)
Nanalie's senior at Harré.
Supports the newbie
Nanalie with her work.



Zenon
(Bal Zeus Doran)
Prince and third son of the King
of Doran. Classmate of Nanalie's
at magic school.



Benjamine
(Meda Lilith Feltina)
Nanalie's fashionable friend.
Was her roommate in the
dorms during their six years
at magic school.



Nikeh
(Hale Brunel)
Nanalie's super girly friend.
Was her roommate in the
dorms during their six years
at magic school.

Dramatis Personae

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Prologue

If I look up at the clear blue sky, I can see a giant island floating there, gently, as if it had no better place to be.

The scenery I can see from here hasn't changed one bit since I was born.

If I look further beyond, I can see another island of a different size, floating in much the same manner.

Of course, that hasn't changed either.

Neither has what I've wanted to be, ever since I was little.

Where do Snow White Witches go, I wonder?

Back during that time when I had wanted to know everything about this world.

Back to when I had wanted colors to fill my snow-white world.

I had wanted so many colors.

Since then I've been led on, all along, by a single, brilliant ray of crimson light.

Just how many colors does my world have now, I wonder?

Until I Became a Receptionist

Magic has been all around me, ever since I was born.

If my mother twirls her fingers in an arc, objects immediately start to levitate, and if my father utters an incantation, flames burst from his fingertips and destroy demons. It is *very* cool to watch.

The old lady who lives next door uses magic on her flower bed, making the flowers sing every morning, and quite noisily at that. The old man who lives across the street, as if to counter her flowers' song, casts a spell on his own vegetable field and makes them sing as well, probably out of spite for the old lady.

But his vegetables sing in somewhat lower tones than the old lady's flowers, and so contrary to what one might expect, the combination of the two results in a pleasant harmony. I don't think the old man has realized that.

Well then, why don't I try? I think, and wave my fingers around as hard as I can. Yes! To the right, to the left, up, down; I try shaking my fingers all around. I even try making them dance in the air. Thanks to that, perhaps, yes, something happens: it seems like I've caused a bit of a breeze... *My bangs fluttered a bit, didn't they?*

But nothing around me levitates, and no flames erupt from my fingers. The flowers do not sing, and I cannot make anything harmonize.

I'm just a young girl, so I don't really know anything about incantations.

"Nanalie, we're leaving soon!"

"Okaaaay!"

I hear my mother's voice and turn away from the window in my room, where I was watching the islands float in the sky.

Starting today, I'll be attending the kingdom's Royal School of Magic. I've just

finished packing my luggage. As it's a boarding school, I won't be able to come back home whenever I want to, so I'm a little worried that I'm going to forget to pack something.

Well, I suppose even if I do forget something, it's not that important, so I guess I might as well not get all flustered.

And even though I said I won't be able to easily come back home, it does seem like the school has long vacations, so it's not like I'll *never* be able to return. If I do need something, I'll make arrangements to get it during one of the breaks.

I'm twelve years old now. I'll be attending the Royal School for six years, until I turn eighteen.

"Alrighty then."

Some slightly dirty white walls. A rickety wooden bookshelf that would be difficult to call "pretty." On top of a desk near the window lies a box full of the textbooks I used as a student at the village schoolhouse.

A canopy hangs down from the ceiling over the simple bed. A long time ago, back when I was much younger than I am now and aspired to have a bed like a princess, my father had fixed a couple of rusty hooks in the ceiling and hung the sheets around my bed.

The stuffed toy bear I had begged my mother for a long time ago is looking down at me from his place up on top of the brown wardrobe.

I leave my room, carry out all of my luggage, and straighten the sleeves on my thin blue dress.

I twirl around and look back at the room whose owner will be gone for a while, this little space of mine, and try to burn the image in my mind—and then I rush off to where my mother is waiting.

* * * *

A small village in the Kingdom of Doran.

I, Nanalie Hel, was born here, with an archaeologist for a mother and a sorcerer-exorcist for a father.

We are neither aristocrats nor merchants, merely a very normal household, and we live among other families much like ourselves.

If there's anything that can be said to be "unusual" about our family, it's that my mother is an archaeologist. Or rather, she used to be. A long time ago, she used to travel all over to investigate different ruins, but she hasn't done much of that recently.

My father's job as a sorcerer, on the other hand, is quite normal in our kingdom and in the world at large. Down at Harré's Sorcerer's Guild, he makes most of his money by exorcising demons, as well as taking on a wide variety of other kinds of assignments. You have to be able to use a certain degree of magic as a sorcerer, because the job itself is actually fairly dangerous. Depending on the assignment, it might be easy or difficult work, but the harder jobs pay more.

"Daaaaaad, it's early!"

"Can't start complaining about that at this point, Nanalie."

While I've never been to work with my mother, a long time ago, I went twice with my father.

As a little kid, I was afflicted with a special kind of curiosity, constantly asking him questions like "What're you always doing at work?" "Where do you go?" "What island is that?" and "What kind of job do you do?" I was curious about everything in the world, and probably caused no end of nuisance for all the adults around me with my questions. Perhaps my father was good at hiding it, but he never showed any annoyance at my questions. Even just thinking about it now makes me realize what an irritating little child I must have been.

The job I accompanied him on was a comparatively easy one—a request that had a reward of only about twenty pegalo. (If I had to say how much "twenty pegalo" is worth, it's about how much our family spends on food for one day.)

Harré is a kind of office that supplies jobs to the sorcerers that frequent the place daily. My first time visiting there with my father is an experience I'll never forget.

"Welcome, little lady."

I was quite excited, and was totally absorbed in taking in the décor. I had originally thought it would be a very stiff and serious place, but it was actually completely the opposite, with an atmosphere that felt a lot like the tavern my father often went to. Both the walls and the floor were made of wooden boards, making it seem quite warm and friendly. They also seemed to have a place to eat somewhere inside, as I remember smelling the pleasant aroma of some spicy meat.

“D’ya have anything that I can do with my kid?”

While I was in the middle of looking at everything, Father was asking the receptionist lady to find an assignment for him. It took her a long time. Since it had to be a job where it was okay to take a child along, I’m sure it was difficult to pick one out. Or so I think, looking back at it now.

And then it seemed like they had decided on a job, because the receptionist looked down and waved at me with a smile as I stood there, holding my father’s hand. “Good luck, and take care!” she said to me as we left.

I think I remember the request itself being quite easy—just doing a bit of work by helping out an old lady in her fields.

It all ended sooner than I had expected. Since I had been imagining something rather more fantastical, I was a little disappointed with the whole experience.

After all, there hadn’t been anything different about the work we did on the job from what we did at home.

“Welcome back. You’ve done well. Our little lady here has done a good job as well, hasn’t she?”

That’s what she said to me and my father when we returned to Harré after we had completed the job.

The receptionist had welcomed us with probably nothing more than a perfectly perfunctory greeting, but for some reason her expression, and the bright smile she gave us, stuck in my mind so firmly that I froze for a moment and stared at her, utterly and totally transfixed.

“...? Is something the matter?”

“Nanalie?”

Even if I had been ordered to explain myself in that moment, the feeling wasn't something that I understood that well myself. It was something close to love at first sight, I think.

Regardless of what exactly I was feeling, to me, as the child I was, she looked positively radiant.

The dignified way in which she carefully gave us the documents for a job. The way her facial expression was the same regardless of whether the job was a dangerous or a boring one.

When we left she would wish us *“good luck,”* and when we returned to make our report she would greet us with a smile and those magic words: *“Welcome back, you’ve done well.”*

“Waa—!”

And so I, who had seen all of that for myself, stood staring at the receptionist lady with my eyes sparkling.

Not at my father, who had worked so hard to take care of the actual work of the request.

Not at the big man standing at the next counter who was bragging about completing some difficult assignment.

My eyes were drawn only to the woman who sat there, the same as ever, always waiting with a smile. I felt something akin to intense longing and aspiration seeping, simmering, and boiling out of me as I stood there, staring at her.

And so I, who had stood there staring unblinkingly at the lady at Harré, was gently dragged away by my father, my shoes squeaking on the floor as he pulled me away. He thought I was tired or something, apparently.

“Aspiration” is something that isn't achieved because you *want* to aspire to something or someone.

Before you know it, you find yourself aspiring to be something or someone. In my experience, it was a feeling that came on quite suddenly and without any

particular reason. I might have dreamed of becoming a flower shop owner, I might have aimed to become a chef, or eventually chosen to do something else entirely. That's where I was at that moment, just in that mental state of, "I want to become like that receptionist." There wasn't anything mysterious or strange about what I was feeling. It was simply what I wanted to become.

"I, I will be like that lady!"

And so what I wanted to be in the future turned into "*Receptionist Lady*." It certainly wasn't anything fancy, but it was something necessary. To me, anyway.

But when I told Father and Mother about my new dream, they, for some reason, tried very hard to dissuade me.

Their reasoning was: "You have to be an outstanding student in all of your magic studies. You have to be able to fight with magic and be smart enough to be in the top ranks of the students at the Royal School of Magic. Only those who have all of those skills can work there."

Upon hearing that, however, I only wanted to become a receptionist even more.

After all, just thinking about how that incredibly graceful lady also has the skills to fight with magic and is intelligent enough to be at the top of her class—it made me admire her just that much more.

In order to persuade the two of them, I worked hard to become the number one student, even if it was only at the village schoolhouse. I would lock myself away inside the schoolhouse's materials room, constantly pushing myself to figure out how to be able to do new types of magic, slowly understanding more and more, and asking my mother, who was well versed in such things, about how to make magic circles. Even with just that simple goal of learning the basics about magic circles, I felt that the way I threw myself into my studies was quite different from how I had studied before.

Thanks to my efforts, I was consistently able to be the top student at the schoolhouse, and was able to learn all the basic facts about magic that every child needed to know.

“You don’t have a familiar yet, so you’re going to ride in this horse carriage,” my mother says to me on the day I am leaving for magic school.

“Okay.”

“Don’t go catching a cold, alright?”

“I won’t, Mom!”

In order to get to school, I get into the flying horse carriage. There isn’t anyone else on board—not even a driver.

This is the only way I can get to the island floating up in the sky. Humans who have familiars get there differently, as they can use them to travel there quite quickly and easily. My father has a familiar, but it’s not permitted for parents to take their children to the island, so he can’t take me.

With that in mind, my mom has crafted this magical contraption especially for me.

At first glance it seems like quite the normal horse-drawn carriage: a horse connected to a humble, light brown carriage. But if you feed the horse a piece of paper that has the destination written on it, that four-legged creature will leap into the air and carry the carriage and its passenger to that place. It’s a *magnificently* magical carriage.

If I ever want to return home, all I need to do is have it eat a piece of paper that says “take me home,” so it’s quite convenient.

“I’m heading off!”

I feed the paper to the horse, get in the carriage, and we leave the ground. When I look down, I can see my mother, waving at me, growing smaller and smaller.

“This is such a comfortable ride! Just what I’d expect from a carriage my mother made.”

Above the Kingdom of Doran floats the “*Royal Isle*,” the island where the King resides. It’s the same in every kingdom, with the king’s castle on an island, and it’s very much taken for granted that the island will be floating in the sky above the kingdom.

That said, I don't exactly know why the island is floating. When I ask adults, their responses are always quite vague, and their opinions on the subject differ. One theory I learned in the village schoolhouse was that long ago, in a time when demons rampaged throughout the land in much greater numbers than they do now, the greatest wizards of the age came together and lifted the castle and lands surrounding it into the sky, so that the royal family held in such high esteem by the kingdom would be just a little safer, protected from the dangers below. Or so I had been taught.

Of course, if there was one theory, there were others, but most were similar to this one.

And so now, on the Royal Isle, is a School of Magic. It's a place with a rather long history, and also the school my father had attended. You have to graduate from this school if you want to be a sorcerer, and since he had indeed aspired to be one, it had been an easy decision for him.

Those who wish to join the Royal Knights, those who wish to seriously study magic... all of them come here. If you want to work in a place like Harré, you need a diploma from this school.

One can learn a certain degree of magic by studying at a normal school, but the difference between what you can study there and at the Royal School is a difference in order of magnitude, not simply degree. To put it more clearly, if you study at a normal school then you'll learn how to cook simple meals for yourself at home, but at the Royal School you'll learn how to create some of the finest cuisine in all the world.

Many of the children who go to the school have aristocrats for parents, who hold ranks like "duke" and "count," among others. I've heard that many of those aristocratic children are half-forced to come here, with some wanting to attend and others attending against their will.

The aristocrats have an obligation to protect their lands from invasion by outside forces, so they take on military responsibilities. From an economic standpoint, managing their lands is part of their job, but as ruler of their domains it's their responsibility to protect them as well. With demons still rather common in recent years, they need to become strong enough to defend

their lands against them, as befit their roles as masters of their domains.

Must be difficult to be an aristocrat. It's not all just wearing those fancy, flowing outfits.

“Wowwww!”

I can see the castle on the Royal Isle from my carriage. The white walls of the palace are far more beautiful than anything I've seen in pictures. I got quite excited by just thinking about how it was where the King and the Queen Consort lived.

In front of the castle and several times smaller, but still far larger than my own home, is a big building. *I suppose that's the School of Magic.*

According to the map of the island that my mother gave me, there are several buildings in the town surrounding the castle where some of the King's retainers live , and near the town, the campus for the School of Magic is indicated on the map.

I'm finally going to be able to take my first step towards becoming a receptionist lady.

I grip my hands together at my chest, my heart pounding in anticipation as I think about all the new adventures I'm going to have at my new school.

Before I Became a Receptionist - At the Royal School of Magic

It's been one week since I became a student at Doran's Royal School of Magic. My studies are, of course, different from what I've done so far. We aren't studying how to levitate things or move them. At this school, they are having us learn a wide variety of magic, including combat and assault magic. Just because it's my first year doesn't mean we're learning beginner stuff. Exactly what I'd expect from a top-level cooking class.

Oh, scratch that—I mean “magic school.”

Before coming to this magic school, everyone had to have acquired a certain level of magical ability, but since the school I had attended was royally certified, I am totally capable of doing all this beginner stuff with ease. If I weren't, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have been *allowed* to be a student here if I hadn't gotten that stuff down.

There is something like an entrance exam at magic school. They test things like whether you can levitate objects, use illumination magic, and draw at least five perfect magic circles from memory. A great number of skills like that have to be performed during the test. But it's not only magic that is tested—there are also common sense things, like the laws and geography of Doran. You must prove yourself to have memorized a basic level of knowledge about the world. My father had told me before the test that certain kinds of magic that hadn't been taught at my school were also tested, and so I had my parents help me so I could pass this test, spending every day either studying at the schoolhouse or at home.

I would read so many books and other materials until my hands would start shaking with exhaustion, and my parents, upon seeing this, would on occasion force me to go to bed.

Those are pretty good memories.

“Did all of you happen to enjoy the ball held the other day?”

“I was unfortunately unable to attend. Were you able to make an appearance, Hayti?”

Now then.

If I was asked what my first impression was upon starting my time at magic school, I would have to say... there sure are quite a few “dazzling” students, I suppose.

“When I realized I would not be able to go to such a fine event for another half-year or more, I simply could not pass up the opportunity to attend.”

The aristocratic girls are partaking in small talk in the classroom.

As one might expect, there were more aristocrats than “normal folk” here, and because the school did not have uniforms, the difference in dress between the two groups was quite stark. I had brought quite a few clothes from home, but I had selected them mostly on the basis of how easy they were to move around in, and had paid little attention to how I would look. Today I have yet again come to school wearing a blue one-piece dress that hangs below my knees, with a light brown leather belt wrapped around my waist. I’ve taken care to add attachments to the belt so that small tools can be hooked on it, so it’s totally practical as well.

Yes, this is me—one of the commoner children who go to this school wearing normal clothes. All the kids in the village would dress like this too, wearing clothes that were easy to move around in and convenient, the functional form of wear unique to commoners. I, who had believed this was a place meant for those who wanted to study magic, never dreamed that all of the little lords and ladies who came to this school would be wearing frilly dresses or expensive shoes or anything else like that. There’s going to be a lot of practical training, I thought. Lessons where we need to move around, sweat, get dirty. Of course no one would be wearing their finery to class.

Yeah, to be honest—I underestimated the aristocracy.

The aristocratic girls wear long dresses, and while the types of dress and their various ornamentations are different, they all give off the same aura of high

nobility. Of course, neither their legs nor their feet are visible, unlike my own. Unlike me.

On top of that, they have cute things like hooded puff-sleeves on the shoulders of their dresses, so their shoulders are actually more exposed than in a normal dress, and in quite a lascivious manner at that. I remember feeling a sudden dizziness upon walking into the classroom, feeling as though I'd stumbled into a party in progress.

The boys are dressed just as I'd always imagined noble boys dressed: with pants and boots, shirts and vests, and fine, long-sleeved suit coats on top. They were the outfits of gentlemen, certainly.

"Ohohoho!"

"Hahahaha!"

Um, have I barged into some sort of party...? ahem This is a classroom, just a classroom, Nanalie.

The school buildings and the campus in general were, in a good way, rustic, and did not look new. *Well, the school has been around for a long time, so of course everything looks a bit old.* The rooms had windows but were rather humid, and while it could be cool indoors on hot days, when it was cold, it felt like it was even colder inside than it was outside. Despite all that, the ceilings of both the classrooms and the hallways were rather high, so they felt like the inside of some rich person's mansion.

It was as if someone had taken the King's pure white castle and made the exterior and interior a little browner, a little more dilapidated... No, that's probably going too far. It wasn't that fancy. But it did *feel* that fancy. In a good way, of course.

So there I was, in the middle of all this fancy gorgeousness, but it wouldn't do to forget the existence of the other students who had commoner backgrounds.

Every grade was split up into three different classes, and ours was made up of 150 boys and girls. The ratio between girls and boys was 1:1, so there were 75 of each. Among the 150 students, approximately 50 of them were commoners. Each class had 50 students. Commoners made up a third of the grade, so while

we were in the minority, I took some comfort knowing that I wasn't the only one who had a common background.

I had seen a boy wearing a rather rumpled coat, and I thought I would go over and talk to him so that we could get through these feelings of being left out together, as allies.

...That said, in this classroom, there were only two commoners, including myself.

"To think that we must study alongside peasants..."

"Oh my, were you not aware? Long ago, apparently there were quite a few more. The aristocracy makes up more than half of the student body now, however."

"But in the next classroom over, half of the students are peasants. So there's still quite a few of them, aren't there?"

"In any case, it would have been quite nice to have everyone in this classroom be part of the aristocracy, wouldn't it?"

The conversations between the aristocrat kids that I overheard were being held at a volume that could certainly not be called "discreet." I could very easily tell who was saying what. It's that group of boys and girls in front of me to my left.

"Whyever would we need those two extras, hmm? Bit unnecessary, no?"

I can feel the stares of the people around me stabbing into me.

Hmm, is that so? Well, I was thinking just the same thing. Like, why are the numbers so out of balance like this?

Commoners make up more than half of the students next door, but in this one there are only two, including me. What on earth is going on here? They should have just gone ahead and totally split up the commoners from the aristocrats.

What were the teachers thinking, dividing up the students like this...

Because of the way they had divided up the students, I was becoming the target of the derision of the aristocrats as they put on airs.

“Look at her clothes. They’re rather unfortunate, aren’t they?”

“They indeed look uncomfortable.”

I could hear some of them giggling. Dammit, they are *definitely* making it so I can hear them, those freaking *dirtbags*.

But that kind of stuff doesn’t work on me. It doesn’t bother me in the slightest. As if I could allow myself to break down here, in front of *them*.

Yeah, just you wait, idiots, I’ll earn the best marks of the year and definitely be able to look down at you fools and say, “Oh my, aren’t all of you ladies and gentlemen of aristocratic heritage? My my, and somehow your marks are worse than those that I, a commoner, was able to earn? Oh no, this won’t do. Is. Something. The. Matter. With. You?”

At some point, my goal had changed from getting *high* marks to getting the *best* marks. Perhaps now is a good time for me to redefine what I want to achieve. After all, if I am going to aim to get high marks, I might as well try to be the best. It’s more motivating.

Great. Now I just need to work on getting my high-pitched snobby “He-he-he-he!” laugh perfected by graduation.

“.....Ahh.”

I sit down at my desk, rest my chin on my hands, and take a look around the classroom.

From the same group as before I can hear some distinguished voice say something like “How vulgar she looks,” but I ignore that. I pay it absolutely no mind.

The classroom windows are to the left from where I am sitting now, and the desks in the classroom are arranged in a sort of ascending staircase manner, with each row a step higher than the previous.

I can see round lights aligned quite cleanly, running along the ceiling of the classroom. I thought it was quite odd that this was the source of illumination for our classroom, at first. I knew several pieces of illumination magic, but as far as I remembered, I had never seen anything like that. It’s probably some kind of

magical device.

My seat in this classroom was, as I went up the stairs, on the twentieth level. At first I was uneasy with how high it was compared to the rest of the classroom, but I now think of it as a rather good place for observation, where I can take in the whole classroom at a glance. I don't stand out in this spot, either.

Having said that, the aristocrats still managed to look at me rather piercingly, their gazes focused on my frugal commoner attire.

"Sir Alois, would you possibly mind if I moved that commoner over there so I could sit beside you instead?"

"My lady, dost thou intend to go before my humble self?! To even think of one such as you, the daughter of a mere baron, speaking to *Sir Rockmann* before myself..."

"Say what you may, Lady Maris, but are you not also of lower rank than Sir Rockmann?"

"Sir Alois, take no heed of Lady Maris and Lady Nala! Would you care to grace my mansion with your presence sometime soon?"

"Now, now! You too shall learn your place."

I take my hands that had been supporting my chin and cover my ears.

It may be break time right now, but they sure are going on and on quite noisily. At the schoolhouse I had attended up until quite recently, the students had also spoken in rather loud voices, but those girls would chitter-chatter in a rather cute fashion that these girls did not seem capable of. It feels like I'm being forced to watch some vicious struggle by carnivorous beasts over a piece of meat.

While the other group of kids in front of me and to my left who had been talking earlier hadn't been too bothersome to hear at a distance, I'm right next to this conversation, so it's rather irritating. The way that their shiny dresses keep blinding me is rather painful, and if it was allowed, I'd very much prefer to wear a blindfold.

“Sir Alois!”

One of the girls clasped her hands together, cheeks flushed and eyes shining.

“Would you do me the honor of letting me sit next to you?”

“Don’t be so hasty, Lady Maris!”

Now let’s see if he does them the “honor” of noticing them talking to him.

Right now, these girls are fighting over a certain boy. They are rather insistently crowding around him like flies to a honey pot, unable to stay away from the allure of his sweetness.

“Oh, that’s right,” he said, “I went to Maris’s mansion the other day, didn’t I? Thanks for the tea, it was delicious.”

“Oh, that was my pleasure. Please do be sure to visit again.”

Maris, one of the aristocratic girls, was blushing.

Upon seeing their interaction, the rest of the girls who were left out pulled out handkerchiefs from somewhere, bit the tips of the cloth, and began letting out rather frustrated, high-pitched screeching: “*hiiiiiiiiiii-!*”

I was thoroughly impressed by the whole performance. It was the first time I had seen people do that sort of thing, ever. While I did have some thoughts about the way they talked about us commoners, being able to look and laugh at them now and then was kind of fun. I won’t say that to their faces, because I’m quite sure they’d find some way to punish me if I did, but still.

“Nala,” the boy said, “would you mind if I came over to your place during the next vacation?”

“M-m-my place?”

And now the next girl’s cheeks are flushing.

“Zelta, I want to talk with you about doing something too sometime before the next vacation.”

“Sir Alois! I will be looking forward to it.”

The girl who had been making a somewhat demonic expression at the girl named Nala brightened up immediately upon being spoken to by the boy.

They sure change their tunes quite quickly. I wonder if he's using some sort of magic on them...

"Talk to you all later, okay?" said the boy, and the girls, hearing this, turned and went back to their seats without a fuss. The commotion that had been going on so loudly until then ceased, and went away just as quickly as it had come on, disappearing just like magic. Everyone left in high spirits.

"..."

I stare intently at the boy next to me.

"What?"

Yeah, I definitely won't get along well with this guy.

The problem isn't with how he looks—well, the face he's giving me right now might be a bit annoying. The bright smile he had shown to all the girls just moments ago has somehow disappeared. And now he has *that* face, asking me "What?" It's not just the fact that his expressionless face is loathsome, it's also the fact that he was able to switch gears so quickly. That's a little disturbing. Although, if he had turned to me with a bright shining smile, I would have found that just as creepy.

"It's nothing," I say.

"What're you doing staring at me like that? It's creepy. And you look ugly with that sullen look on your face, you know."

Ha??!!

"Nghhh..."

Let's ignore the fact that I've just burst a blood vessel somewhere in my head. This idiot, I'll admit, is not bad-looking. I may say he's not bad-looking, and in the words of the world at large, I think they'd say he's pretty handsome. Just, as like, a general opinion. That other people might have.

He was unnaturally tall, to the degree that it made me wonder if we were both actually twelve years old. He looked about two years older. I can hardly see him as a kid the same age that I am. Honey golden hair as fine and smooth as silk, red eyes, a sharp, shapely nose, thin lips, and pale white skin.

In my opinion, it's fair to say that one's fate as a human being is decided based on how well one's facial features are arranged. In the case of this guy, every single part of his face was carefully placed as though someone had drawn it there. He was, as they might say, a "beauty." No doubt some goddess made the man just to her liking.

His totally black outfit suited him, and he had the sort of sweet face girls like. Even though he was a guy, he did have something like the looks of a young woman at times.

But setting all that aside, to me, this guy was:

"Ugh, why don't you just show your true colors? You're nothing more than a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Sheep's clothing? I ripped that off a long time ago, and they all come fawning over me, knowing what I'm really like. There's no avoiding it, you stupid girl."

"You *shithead*."

Our eyes flashed with anger as we looked at each other. I ground my teeth as I glared at him, loud enough for him to hear.



Alois Rockmann.

Ever since I first saw this guy, for some reason, I felt like fighting him. Why he makes me feel that way I don't really understand.

We ended up sitting next to each other, but there was no use trying to change that. It's something that the teacher decided, and at first I hadn't thought of him as someone who would piss me off this much. I had merely thought of him as a boy with a pretty face. That's all.

Even so, for some reason I felt a strong desire to not let myself be beat by this person next to me. I felt some desire to beat him, in fact, and the feeling was strange even to myself.

So this is what "instincts" are, I suppose.

There really might be some way of discerning between friend or foe by scent alone.

But on top of all this, he was willing to become my opponent, and his first words to me as his seatmate were:

"Let's play a game."

That's it.

"...Pardon?"

What's this guy's problem? I thought, but I didn't have the guts to say that out loud to someone I just met, so I simply accepted his proposal. Plus he was wearing clothes that marked him out as a rich kid, and that made me concerned about making him angry.

We did rock-paper-scissors. I put out rock, he did paper, and so I lost.

"I win."

"Wha—!"

I'd no idea what I'd done to make him dislike me so much, but the dark and dusky sneer he gave me told me how he felt. His eyes were shadowed with malicious intent.

All I did was lose at rock-paper-scissors, and yet I feel so utterly defeated.

What is it with this guy?

Ah, I am quite incapable of understanding him. Totally incapable.

And so from then on, for a while, as soon as I sat down in my seat, I'd challenge him to another game. He didn't refuse, and so we kept playing, but with fifty-three wins and fifty-four losses I am, as of yet, losing.

To begin with, though, why did he challenge me to such a game in the first place?

Or so I might have thought at first, but right now I don't care about the reason why we're doing this. I just dislike losing.

Thinking about it now, perhaps most of the reason *why* I want to fight and compete against him is because of our little games. Anyhow, all I could think of was how I absolutely had to beat this guy in our school studies. He'd become my rival.

According to the explanation our teacher gave us, we would not be changing seats or classrooms, ever. In other words, for the next six years, I will be next to this guy the whole time. Even if I'd rather be anywhere else.

Our competition would be decided based on how hard we worked in our studies, not just on luck. If the gods truly existed, this must have been a test made for me.

There is no way I'm going to lose to him.

I overheard some girls talking. "Ah ah, how uncivilized. At this rate I'll never be able to get any closer to the Prince. Not that I care," said one of them.

"Which is it? Do you care or not?!" said a girl next to her.

"As if *you* could ever get close with the Prince!" the other girl shouted back.

The third prince of Doran is also a student in this classroom. His name is Zenon Bal Doran. If Rockmann could be called a pretty boy, the Prince is like a man's man. With black hair and black eyes, even his eyebrows look manly. Make no mistake, both of them have nice faces, but if I had to say which I preferred, it would be the Prince. His closely-fitted black military outfit makes him look gallantly dashing.

Perhaps this is a Golden Age of aristocrat kids or something, but this year it would seem that quite a few powerful families have children beginning school here, so the girls are practically screeching with excitement.

Not that I'm a part of that nonsense.

The Prince who's the focus of all the commotion sits in the seat in front of me. The Prince's fans, unlike Rockmann's, tend to admire him from a distance. When your object of admiration is a prince, it must be rather difficult to just go up and talk to him. And I'm not sure if blondie here next to me is his guard or something, but he's always with the Prince.

Even those who didn't know the two of them that well would think them to just be normal friends from the way that they make casual conversation with each other. What a prince and a commoner actually talk about with each other isn't that interesting, as it turns out, so I couldn't recall much of what they ever said to each other.

I overheard yet another girl talking. "What's up with that girl? She's next to Sir Alois; the least she could do is make some conversation."

"She's the one who *really* needs to learn her place, in my opinion."

Dammit, I **will** be the one laughing at you all someday!

Just you wait!

* * * *

It's been half a year since I came to this school.

My lessons here have been rather fulfilling, and as someone who wants to study a lot, I am quite grateful for that.

It's not just one teacher who teaches us. Different teachers instruct us in their own specialties in a very easy-to-understand manner, and more than that they all know their specialty extremely well, so they always answer questions, no matter how detailed they might be.

Yeah, I'm really glad I entered this school.

"Morning, Nikeh."

“Morning, Nanalie. Your hair is all a mess. A girl should pay more attention to such things!”

She takes me over to the white washbasin and begins brushing my hair. Compared to me, who’s just rolled out of bed, she’s already gotten dressed for the day. Her yellow one-piece dress is quite bright.

I look at her face in the mirror. “Thanks.”

This commoner girl, Nikeh, is one of my roommates in the dormitory. She has pretty blond hair, and she’s more “beautiful” than she is “cute.” But it seems like she actually wants to be called cute, because she usually has her hair done up in two pigtails.

No matter what she looks like, that part of her *is* cute, in my opinion.

We were awkward around each other the first time that we met, but as six months passed we naturally began to feel more at ease with each other (after all, we are sharing a room). Now we’re almost at the stage where we’re friends with all of the other commoner kids at school.

Just like how we don’t change classrooms or seats for all six years at this school, it seems like we won’t be changing rooms or roommates either, and so I am quite relieved to be able to get along with her. As you might expect, because we’re both commoners we have a connection to bond over, and while our classrooms may be different, we both share the same goal, or something like that.

It of course goes without saying that our goal is to “**overthrow the aristocracy.**”

All of us commoners place our hands over our hearts and affirm that solitary goal, as firm and unwavering as the northern star.

“What’s this, Nikeh is playing dorm mother againnnnn?”

The other girl who shares our room, Benjamine, comes over to the washbasin, running her hands through her beautiful, wavy red hair.

She’s the kind of girl that shows a lot of skin. You can see quite a bit of her legs, only barely covered up by some green cloth draped around her waist. She

looks like an older sister, and that's how she feels to me. Her legs are slender and she's pretty.

We've been spending our time together in this one room ever since we entered the girls' dorm. In the dorm, the aristocrats are separated from the commoners, and so me, Nikeh, and Benjamine are all, of course, commoners.

But just because we've been separated doesn't mean our rooms are any different. There are other aristocratic girls in the same building and on the same floor as us, so it just seems like they don't have the commoners and aristocrats room together.

I think it's the right thing to do.

"Nanalie, instead of spending all of your time studying, it'd be better if you practiced being more feminine."

Benjamine, shut up.

"Anyway you two, we need to hurry if we're gonna eat breakfast in the Great Hall."

"No way, is it already that time?"

I remove Nikeh's hands from my head upon hearing that.

"But I haven't finished combing," she complained, but I ran my fingers through my hair and felt like it had become nice and smooth enough for me to be satisfied. My hair's not completely black—it has some dark brown mixed in with it—but thanks to Nikeh's efforts it had become nice and shiny.

The best things to have in life are friends who have all the skills a woman should have.

"Mmmmm, delicious."

We walk over to the Great Hall.

The only reason it was called the "Great" dining hall was because it was large. During breakfast time, a lot of students from different grade levels mixed together here, from the senior sixth years to us first years, so it was the perfect size to hold so many people.

The food was served buffet style, where you could take what you liked, put it on your plate, and then sit wherever you wanted. The dining tables were the standard rectangular shape, but no longer than three tails (one tail was approximately the length of an adult man's arm), and several were lined up nicely.

We piled rice and vegetables on our plates and sat at an empty table near the doors of the Great Hall. The ceiling was made up of glass panes, so we were able to see the sky above the island quite clearly. The spaciousness of it all was wonderful.

"Benjamine! I picked that out!"

"It's because you eat so slow that it always turns out like thiiiis!"

"You thief!"

"Hey, quit spitting all over me!"

I take some of the fried bunny-bird and stab it with a sharp utensil. It's one of my favorite foods. A "bunny-bird" is what we call the blue birds with long ears. The reason their feathers are blue is because they used to be hunted quite fiercely by humans and other animals, and so in order to be difficult for predators to spot, they evolved to be the same color as the sky. Or so it's said.

Must be tough being a bunny-bird. They had to turn that color just to survive. But when their meat is this deliciously juicy, they're rather hard to pass up.

"You got it on my clothes!"

"Oh, sorry."

"Nooooo, my clothes..."

Some of the grease from the bunny-bird had gotten onto Benjamine's green waistcloth. Straight across it, quite cleanly, plop plop, it's stuck on there. It's rather artistically done, if I do say so myself.

"Now what are you going to do? This was freaking expensive, you know"—is what she *doesn't* say to me with any sort of furious expression. She instead becomes more and more crestfallen, losing all of her previous energy.

Perhaps this might be something she does get angry about, but it'll take time

for her to do so.

“Why’d you wear clothes you were so concerned about getting dirty to somewhere like this in the first place? If you care about getting dirty, you should come to eat wearing just whatever.”

“How could you say such a thing, Nikeh? That’s rather heartless.”

“Oh no, Benjamine, I’m really sorry. I’ll learn a spell later that’ll remove that stain and take care of that!”

“Ha. No need to go that far.”

There are no uniforms at this school. All we have are our student IDs. All of us commoners do, of course, pay for our own clothes, and wear whatever we feel like. Nikeh is always wearing a short, one-piece dress with a round collar, and I only wear single-layer clothing with a belt that looks similar to hers. Benjamine, on the other hand, not only wears fancy stuff, but wears something different every day.

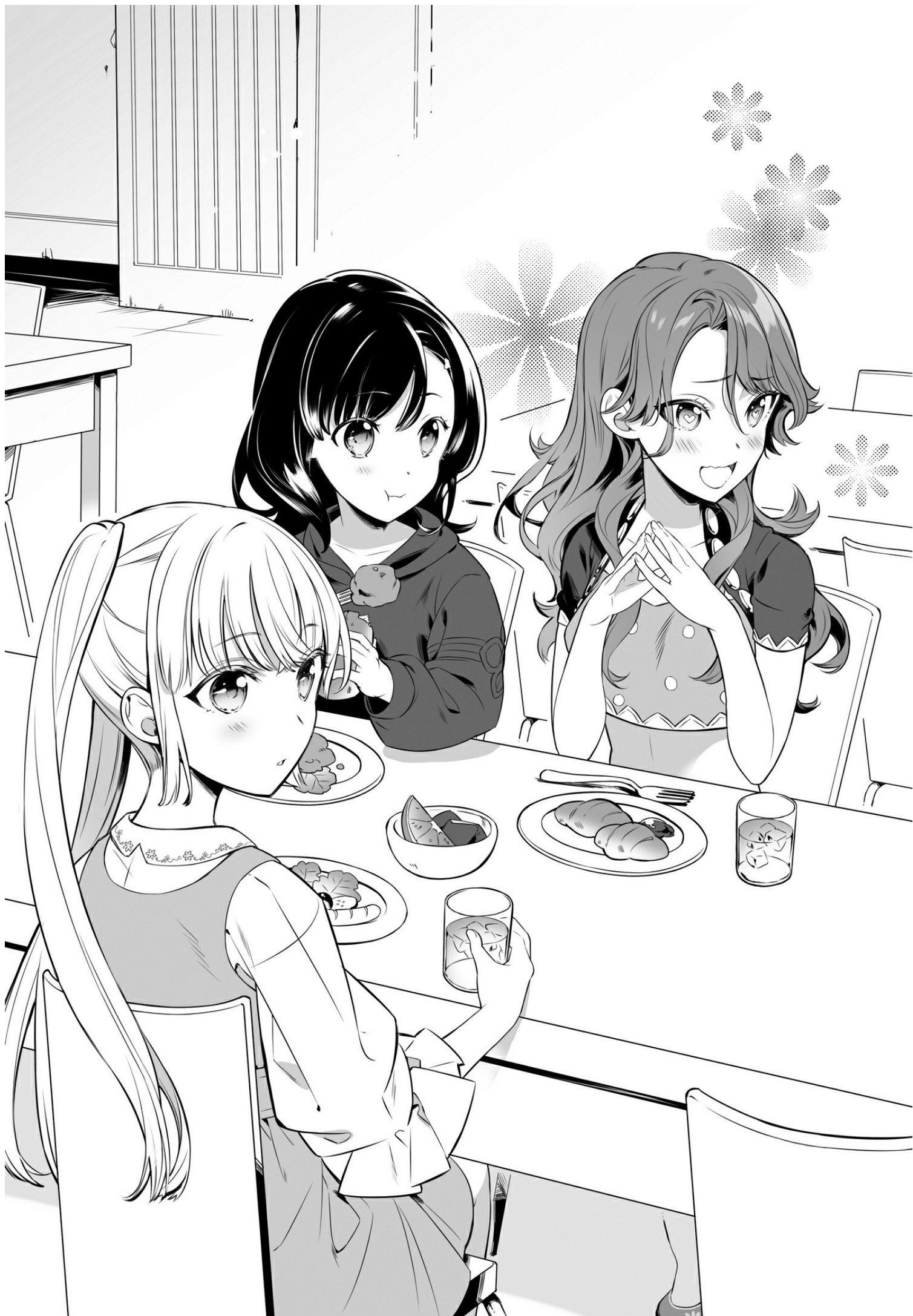
Benjamine is always telling me that I lack any sort of “sex appeal” in my outfits, but seeing as “sex appeal” isn’t necessary for studying, I really am not paying any mind to that sort of stuff... I don’t care about it at all, I swear.

“Oooohhh I will definitely learn that cleaning spell, OK!”

After all, we are all still only twelve years old. What’s the point in worrying about how we look?

Well, I suppose for the aristocrats it’s different. How you dress reflects the status of your house. But Benjamine has already seemed to have found someone that she likes, and so because of that, I think she’s paying careful attention as to her appearance. It’s all rather amusing to watch.

“Oh look, it’s Naru!”



A silver-haired boy passes by the corner of our table. Benjamine's eyes are absolutely sparkling as she excitedly calls out his name. Nikeh, watching her, rolls her eyes as she remarks on Benjamine's behavior.

"You talking about Satanás again? You really like him, don't you?"

If we're talking about who Benjamine likes, it's this boy Naru. It seems like it was love at first sight for her, as if when they first locked gazes with each other she instantly felt the tremors of fate (or so Nikeh told me).

"Satanás, huh..."

Benjamine's crush, the silver-haired boy. That boy's name is Naru Satanás.

He's the other commoner in my class.

He's the first one to find out his magic type in class later that day.

"Up until now I've taught you standard offensive and defensive magic, but starting today I'll be having you learn combat magic according to your elemental affinity, or magic type."

The instant the teacher said that, everyone in the classroom broke out in whispered conversation.

"He said magic type—he means the six types of blood, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

We had all thought this was to be a normal theory lesson and not a practical one, so the sudden shift threw us off balance.

"Within the general field of magic exist six schools. Right now I am going to pass out the 'Tricks and Tips of the Six Colors,' so open your books to the section I tell you to."

The teacher used levitation magic to float dozens of textbooks all at once, each one flying to a different desk. The magic made the books' pages flap in the air like butterfly wings, and the one that came to me shut itself with a *snap* before slowly coming down to rest on my desk.

I look at the textbook that's come to rest right in front of me. There was a picture of a rainbow bridge on its cover. But in front of the bridge was drawn

the Devil, or some other creepy creature, and so the book simply looked creepy. I think they could have put in a little more effort to make this book more approachable. I don't really want to touch that cover.

Having said that, I still have to get on with my studies, so I quickly open the book to the designated section. I saw that the title of the section was "The Six Blood Types."

"These are the six blood types. I'm sure everyone has heard of them before. The 'bloods' refer to magical power. Our magic is in our blood; it's blood itself. You know that, right? As long as we are alive, as long as we have blood flowing through our veins, there will never come a time when we can no longer use magic. In the textbook, it talks about the six different types: Fire, Wind, Water, Ice, Earth, and Lightning. Each and every one of you belong to one of these six types of magic."

Our teacher stretched out his hand and from his fingertips I could see sparks of electricity flashing.

"My magic type is Lightning. As such, the only form of combat magic I can use is lightning magic."

To summarize what the teacher said, "magic types" were essentially the basis upon which our fighting styles were decided. The combat magics that we had learned up until now had been things like paralyzing an opponent, materializing swords and sending them flying towards our opponents, or materializing defensive barriers—all rather tame spells. To be perfectly honest, if you studied, you were able to do the spells. They weren't difficult.

But with these "magic types," there were spells that could only be used by those who belonged to that class. If you didn't have blood in that class, you wouldn't be able to use that form of magic, no matter how hard you worked. If I was a Lightning type and I tried to learn Water combat magic, as long as I still had Lightning-type blood, I'd never be able to use Water combat magic. It would have been futile to try to learn it.

That's what magic types basically were, but I was still rather surprised that less than half a year after starting school here we'd start learning this type of magic. With all the other spells we had to learn, I had figured we had another

year before we started learning type-specific magic, but here we were.

“I don’t think any of you know your elemental affinity yet.”

Light is still flashing from our teacher’s fingertips.

Yes, we still don’t know our own magic types. Our parents and other adults know how to determine one’s elemental affinity, but there’s a rule against teaching children that spell. Apparently their reasoning is that it’s dangerous for children to know their type without knowing how to properly use that type of magic.

If I had continued studying normally at a village schoolhouse, I wouldn’t know my magic type until I turned eighteen years old. For people who took on jobs that didn’t place much importance on one’s magic type, there wasn’t much reason to know, after all. There wasn’t any particular inconvenience that came with not knowing, and there was no point in possessing a weapon that one had no use for. Standard combat spells were thought to be enough.

But people like us, the students who came to this school, were different. Not only was the absolute maximum power of magic necessary to succeed, we also had the motivation to learn it. The aristocrats and those who would become sorcerers placed even more importance on learning elemental magics. After all, they would be the ones fighting the demons.

I just want to become a receptionist lady, but still.

“Professor, would it not be correct to say that Water and Ice are identical types?”

Lady Maris is once again wearing a rather classy dress today. She does have a serious and hard-working personality, so if the whole Rockmann situation wasn’t a thing, I’d actually quite like her. But she makes a point of singling me out, just because I sit next to Rockmann, and is always digging at me and making me out to be an idiot, so I really can’t deal with her.

If I liked him it would be a different story, but to have all that done to me despite the fact I don’t even like him is *quite* irritating.

“They may seem to be similar, but they are not the same. To put it simply, the main difference is whether they are able to instantly manifest as solid or not.”

That's how the professor answered Miss Maris's question. It would seem that they are, in fact, different things.

"Alright then, starting now, we are going to check everybody's magic type, one by one."

And upon hearing that, the entire classroom broke out into conversation again. But unlike before, this time it sounded like there were a few who were excited about the prospect.

Yeah, I'm one of those who is actually a little excited about this. I mean, my magic type is, like, something that I could legitimately call an uncharted territory.

"First... Satanás, come up front."

"Me, sir?"

"If I always called on someone sitting at the end of the front row, they'd constantly be called on, no?"

The commoner boy named Satanás, with some hesitation, stood up from his seat.

The professor's right. The front row students, usually the ones on the right side, are often called upon. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call those seats the least popular places in the entire classroom. I had usually sat somewhere in the middle of the classroom back in my days at the village schoolhouse, and with every seating chart change I had successfully managed to avoid sitting in those seats.

But sometimes the teacher had felt like saying things like "*Hmmm, today let's start from the center,*" so I was never able to let my guard down.

"Alright, let's do this."

"Yessir."

"Stretch out the arm of your dominant hand and spread your fingers, palm facing the ceiling. Then bend your middle finger inwards."

Satanás faced the professor as they stood in front of the lecture podium.

“Once you’ve bent your finger in, concentrate. Then, say ‘*semeion*.’”

“Se-?”

“*Semeion*. It means ‘sign.’”

Our professor put his hands on Satanás’s shoulders to reassure him. “It’ll be okay,” he said, and then drew his hands away to watch him.

“*Semeion*.” (Flower of the Sign.)

With everyone watching, he finally spoke the incantation. It was so quiet that I thought I could hear the *gulp* of someone swallowing in anticipation, and I myself unconsciously clenched my hands a little tighter as I watched.

“Hm? What’s this?”

Satanás had done just as the professor had told him to, and around him I could see things changing.

The textbook on top of the podium flipped open all on its own, breezing through pages, and even though not a single window was open, everyone’s hair fluttered in a gust of wind.

Time passed and finally, above Satanás’s hand, a small tornado spun into existence.

“Professor, am I...?”

“That means your magic type is Wind, Satanás. You’ll be studying combat magic that uses wind from here on out. Give it your best effort.”

“Yessir!”

Whether it was because he was just happy to be the first to discover his magic type, or whether it was because he was a Wind Wizard, Satanás’s eyes were beaming with excitement.

I was opening and closing my own hand in anticipation.

“Just because you’ve now seen how it’s done, don’t go trying it where you’re sitting. Satanás happened to manifest his affinity without incident, but on occasion, the spell can derail and cause an explosion or something like that.”

The kid sitting next to Satanás quickly shoved his hands under his desk upon

hearing the teacher say that. Apparently that was exactly what he had been planning to do.

He called on the next student, "Come on now, get up here in order."

And so as the teacher had said, one by one all of us went up and checked our affinities.

"It would seem that my type is Fire."

Miss Maris's magic type appeared to be Fire, as above her palm a brilliantly red blaze of hot flames was burning. I thought it seemed exactly the right type for her. But she'll have to take care not to burn her dresses, I suppose.

Prince Zenon's type was Lightning. The instant he spoke the incantation, white beams of light destroyed the teacher's podium and all the excited commotion ceased for a moment in stunned shock. But no one was injured, so I guess we should be glad about that. The teacher would use restoration magic to restore all of the broken things to their original condition anyway.

Then I found out that the guy next to me was a Fire type. And it wasn't just some glowing flameball appearing above his palm, it was a massive blaze that took the shape of a dragon and began crawling around on the ceiling. It was extremely hot. He looked at everyone sweating from the heat and smiled, and at that moment I thought I'd very much like to punch his guts out.

"Alois, end it," our teacher said, snapping his fingers.

Snapping one's fingers was the most basic way of finishing a spell, and if you did so, the magic you caused would cease.

But my god, what a bastard he is. To be able to produce something like that on his first try.

"Ohhhh! Alois and I are the same! Fire type! It's fate!"

"Me too!"

But rather than be frustrated that they were all the same type as him, Maris and the other Fire-type girls seemed rather pleased at the discovery and went around smiling and high-fiving each other.

Ugh. I had come to take some amusement in their recent fighting with each

other. It was a different story when they wanted to complain about me, however.

Those girls whose types didn't match watched the girls whose did with frustration, pulling their handkerchiefs out of their pockets and biting down on them in anguish. It's already becoming a type of performance art.

"Next is Nanalie. Come on up."

Rockmann had just finished his turn, so that meant it was now mine. I responded to the teacher with a sound, confident voice, but my feet were dragging a little. It felt like I was wearing shoes made of lead.

Why is it that I have to be the one to go after that dragon thing was put out there? It's unfair. We're not exactly competing at this very moment, but I feel like in some way I am losing.

Of all the magic we'd learned so far, there hadn't been an obvious difference in how impressive the spells were from student to student. Everyone seemed to have the same amount of offensive force and defensive capability.

But this time, there was quite clearly an element of individual ability.

"Nanalie, don't just stand there, hurry up and get down here."

"...Yes, Professor."

There is *definitely* a difference between different individuals this time.

"Nanalie, what's the matter? Do you feel ill or something?"

"No."

The teacher called me again, as I hadn't moved away from my seat at all. I mentally sighed, and then stood up to descend the stairs. Rockmann had been waiting on the stairs for me to get up from my seat, and when I passed by him, he said, "You aren't freaking out or anything, are you?"

"I-I don't need a spoiled boy like you worrying over me!" I shouted at him as I ran down the stairs.

That revolting *bastard*. One of these days I am going to let him *have it* and he'll be just frothing incoherently in the corner by the time I finish with him!

“Alright Nanalie, stick out your dominant hand.”

“Yes, sir!”

I let out a self-satisfied “hm!” and stretched out my arm, full of confidence.

“*Semeion!*” (Flower of the Sign.)

I focused as hard as I could, ignoring the sounds of the whispers I’d heard around me before I started, saying things like “She’s just a commoner” and “I’m sure her ability will be weak.”

The teacher took pieces of chalk and chucked them at a shockingly high speed at the students who had been talking, so it didn’t end up being a problem after all. *Thank you, Teacher.* (Teachers had quite a lot of authority inside the school.)

After I finish reciting the incantation, I stare fixedly at my hand. I don’t know what’s going to happen, so I take a deep breath and try to relax.

“...Huh?”

Ten seconds had passed and I had seen no special change occur. Wait, hold on a second—there’s no way that I don’t have an affinity, right? Right?! If I don’t, I’ll be the laughingstock of the entire class!

“Nanalie Hel! Your hair!”

I lifted my gaze and looked back at everyone. “What?”

Miss Maris was pointing her finger at me with her eyes wide open. For someone who was usually glaring at me and full of choice insults, the way she was looking at me was clearly different than usual. What on earth was she so surprised about? She said something about my hair?

What about it...?

“...Hm?”

I take my other hand and run it through my hair, and what passes through my fingers is blue, the color of water. Flowing and glossy blue hair.

Blue? Whose hair is this?

“Well, magic is something that resides in our blood, after all. There are some whose hair color changes when they use this spell.”

The teacher was saying this quite calmly. I understood what he was saying a few seconds later.

“M-m-m-m-my ha—”

My, hair, color, has, ch, changed?

“Why?!”

Relax, self. Let’s take a moment to calm down.

I take a strand of hair and pinch it between my thumb and forefinger, bringing it up to my eyes. I had seen it correctly before. The color *had* changed.



“I said this earlier, but this does happen on extremely rare occasions.”

“I-I understand that, but still.”

“It occasionally happens,” which must mean that it had happened in the past, right? Sure, but, really! Sure I’ve heard stories of that happening, but no one else in the class had that happen to them, and beyond all that, what am I supposed to do with this hair?! If I stop the spell, will it go back to how it was before?!

“But, but Teacher! Can’t this be fixed?!”

“Not unless you use magic to dye your hair. It came about with the full awakening of your magical abilities, after all. You can’t go changing it back now. Don’t like it? It’s pretty, so there’s no harm, right?”

“Seriously, how much more dyed can my hair *get*?”

Speaking of which, what is my magic type then?! What type is “magic that dyes hair”?! What am I, Beautician-type?!

“What...?”

All of a sudden, the temperature inside the classroom dropped.

Shining white light fell over the entire classroom. Everyone looked up, stretching out their hands, saying “What’s going on?”

On top of my outstretched hand, one of the falling things came to rest.

It’s a clump of something a little smaller than my palm, but it comes to a gentle, floating stop on top of my hand. Just as if it was coming back to its original spot.

Someone whispered, “Is this an ice crystal? It’s so pretty...”

The teacher was nodding his head up and down behind me.

“I get it now. Nanalie is Ice, it seems. The only Ice-type in here is you. I don’t know about the other classes, but just as I’d expected, there’s not too many of your type.”

Wait. Ice?

“There’s a teacher who’s also an Ice-type, so it’s all good. Don’t worry about it.”

While the teacher claimed it was nothing to be concerned about, it’s said that Ice Mages are the least common types of mages not only in our own kingdom, but in neighboring countries as well. It’s not like there weren’t *any*, but they were the type that made up the smallest percentage of mages.

“Yes, sir.”

I snapped my fingers and released the spell. The crystals stopped falling. But my hair color didn’t revert back from blue. *Goodbye, my lovely dark brown hair.*

The teacher gently put his hands on my back as I stood there hanging my head, and guided me back towards the stairs. Put in a different way, I was quickly made to return to my seat. Quite flustered after what had happened, I could only think of it as the latter.

“Yes yes, I’m going back. The Blue Ice Woman is going back to her seat.”

“Huh? The color of your eyes is different too, you know,” said Rockmann.

“What! You’re lying!”

“I’m lying.”

“You’re lying?”

“I’m lying about lying.”

“Which is it?!”

Rockmann said all this to me after I’d returned to the seat next to him. I had thought he was joking, but it hadn’t quite sounded like a joke. I wanted to see for myself, but with no mirror, I couldn’t check the truth of the matter.

“You’re definitely lying...”

The color of my eyes has changed too?! What is happening to me?!

I hadn’t *loved* the dark brown of my hair—there had actually been a part of me that aspired to have something like Nikeh’s blond hair. I had thought Benjamine’s red hair to be nice as well, and Prince Zenon’s perfectly pure black hair was also something that I had been jealous of, as someone who had dark

hair.

So... but still. Not blue.

“Hmmmmmm...”

I sat down and made a fist. I’d made my decision. What I had could be called “uncommon,” but from a different point of view, what I had could also be thought of as an “unusual” magic type. This is the hand I’ve been dealt, so there’s no point in brooding over it endlessly.

I’ll perfect this “Ice magic” of mine and get the best grades of the year.

* * * *

Two years passed.

I’d gotten quite used to the magic type-specific lessons. My grades are, at this moment, extremely good, and at the periodically held practical tests, I’m always showered with compliments like *“Just what I’d expect from you, Hel!”* that make me feel like I’m walking on sunshine. I believe I’m the type of person that improves the more you compliment them, so if they praise me any more, I’ll be able to practically spit ice.

These periodic magic tests are held at unpredictable times to keep everyone on their toes. Our grades are turned into numeric scores that are publicly displayed, so it’s easy to tell at glance that I’m dominating the top ranks.

The test this time turned out to be just a written test without a practical. It had questions like “What is the definition of a magic circle?” and asked for things like explanatory diagrams. For someone like me, who never failed to do both the pre-lesson reading and post-lesson review, there wasn’t a single question I couldn’t answer. It was actually easy for me.

Back when I had attended the village schoolhouse, I had always gotten the top grades, and I had been eager to show that I was determined and hard-working enough to take the top grades here as well. With that, I could feel the day that I would become an employee at Harré to be near at hand. Easy, easy, easy.

“Second AGAIN?!”

Is what I wanted to say.

“Don’t worry about it. Second place is still pretty awesome, right? I’m going to head off to class, so I’ll see you later.”

After Nikeh had tried to cheer me up with those words, she turned, her two blond ponytails swinging from side to side, and disappeared into the neighboring classroom.

“But, I can’t...”

I let out a sigh. One of my blue hairs, as if taking on my emotions, fell to the ground from my shoulders.

“Why, why aren’t I first?”

The results of the test had come out and, unexpectedly, I was *not* number one. It’s not like I *had* to be number one to be employed at Harré—I had been told that I just had to be somewhere in the top ranks—but still.

But still. My pride simply won’t allow this. If I’m going to aim for something, I’m going to aim for number one, or so I had decided.

And beyond that, I had the other goal of striking back at the aristocrats who made fun of the commoners. I was the one who had said, “Oh my, aren’t all of you ladies and gentlemen of aristocratic heritage? My my, and somehow your marks are worse than those that I, a commoner, was able to earn? Oh no, this won’t do. Is. Something. The. Matter. With. You?”

I couldn’t forget that. **Overthrow the Aristocracy.**

But for some reason, no matter how hard I tried, I was never able to become number one. I’d fallen into this state where I was eternally number two. Each day I worked hard and did my pre-reading and post-lesson review, did more research on things I didn’t understand, and had been so diligent in my studies that Nikeh and even Benjamine had given me bizarre advice like “You should just go ahead and marry your textbooks.”

But if I still couldn’t become number one despite all that, there had to be something I was failing to do in my studies... or so I had let slip out at breakfast the other day, and Benjamine, upon hearing that, had threatened me with “*If*

you keep making ice on your bed, I'm going to roast you with my fire." So I had decided to just keep on working hard like I had been thus far.

"Second place, second place..."

The test result papers were posted in the hallway. Every single student had their ranking posted. It wasn't something stupid like "only the top ten students" were posted. All 150 students from all three classrooms had their results posted.

I stood there hanging my head in front of the rankings. The other students, avoiding the ominous aura of defeat that I was creating, slipped around me and went into the classrooms.

"Dang it..."

There was no point in me just hanging my head in front of the results all day, so I pulled myself together and hurried into the classroom. The sight that greeted me was the same as it always was. *And, speaking of which, my grades are the same as they always are, aren't they, hahaha?* Or so I thought, feeling myself falling into despair as I let out a desperate-sounding giggle.

"Morning, Nanalie."

"Morning, Satanás."

I ascended the twenty stairs and, dodging around the golden-haired obstacle in front of me, was able to relax down into my seat.

"I was playing that 'Take Two' board game with Maris until really late last night. I'm super tired. I wanna go back to bed."

Satanás, who had been sitting in the seat in front of me, comes all the way up to stand in front of my desk. He lets his eyes droop and begins moving his hands as if he was playing 'Take Two' while sleeping. He looks like some exhausted old guy at the end of the workday.

He's the other commoner who's in this class with me. He had curly silver hair that was spiking out all over the place. His deep blue eyes looked like he was sleepy indeed, and his eyebrows looked a bit higher than they usually did, as if he was forcing his eyes to stay open. He was wearing a crumpled black shirt,

and as someone who was always wearing the same simple one-piece dress, I always felt very relaxed around him.

“What’s going on with you and Benjamine?”

“You know what’s up with that. You know I like those older, curvier girls. Someone the same age as me is just not gonna work, you know?”

“It’s not like *I* want you to like *me*, but just hearing you say that kinda makes me irritated.”

I felt a vein bulging out of my forehead in irritation as he gestured, making large breasts in front of his chest with his hands. The more I got to know him, the more I realized my first impression of him had been entirely off. I had thought of him as a mature, quiet kid, but the more we talked, the more I realized that he was basically an unfortunate little dude who seemed destined to piss off women. Despite that, Benjamine seemed to like him. I guess it’s actually impossible to understand what different people think is attractive.

To begin with, Benjamine had said something like “*Be careful not to let any bad bugs bite you*” when the topic of Satanás first came up.

Not only is he a commoner like me, but I had started talking with him in order to get insider information that I could pass along to Benjamine, and at some point while being this mediator between the two of them, I had become friends with him. Even when I was walking to my solo lessons in a different classroom, he would accompany me along the way, and it really did make me feel like it was a good idea to have a real friend in the class.

Ah, what a normal student life I have. I am happy.

“OUCH!”

Something suddenly slammed into my face. That *crack* was the sound of my happiness being crushed by a fist slamming into my cheek.

“Oh, were you standing there? Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

I rubbed my cheek, which was still stinging from the attack. Sitting back up straight, I gave the guy next to me a hard glare. Standing there yawning and stretching his arms out was Rockmann.

“You did that on purpose! Can’t you treat a lady a bit nicer?!” I said.

“Lady? Who’re you talking about?”

He lifted a hand to his forehead as if to shield his gaze from the sun and began looking around. *This wretch isn’t going to be able to yawn ever again, let alone breathe, by the time I get through with him.*

Today he is once again wearing black pants and boots, with a white shirt underneath a black vest. In all the right and proper places, he has gold embroidered into his outfit. I can often see his black long coat hanging up on the coat hooks at the back of the classroom.

Damn this pampered idiot.

Up until just a few moments ago, he had been sleeping with his head down on his desk, but all of a sudden he wakes up and whacks me with his fist. What’s his *deal*?

“I’m sitting right here, you know?!”

I pointed to myself, and that despicable face of his, deemed so sweet and beautiful by the rest of the world, inched closer to my own. *What the hell is sweet about this face? It’s shady as can be. Rather, smelly as can be.*

“You kicked my back earlier, right? Or did you forget that too, my Lady Ice Idiot?” he said.

“Cut it out with that ‘Lady’ and ‘Ice Idiot’ stuff!”

We glare at each other. We’ve gotten quite good at this staring thing over the past few years. Not like that makes me happy or anything.

My relationship with this guy still hasn’t changed. As if it ever would. With every passing year that we move up a grade level, I feel like the level of our mutual animosity increases as well. We argue whenever we see each other, and whenever one of us sticks out a hand, the game is on, whether that’s in a classroom or anywhere else. If I challenge him he’ll take me on, and if he challenges me I take him on, anywhere, anytime. Our fights are rough to the point right before we would destroy everything around us.

“This time I will *definitely* freeze your entire freakin’ body!” I said.

“Hm, well you’re welcome to do so, if you can.”

Chill air swirled around my hands, and within Rockmann’s fists, flames erupted.

Everyone in the classroom looked at us with... interest? Interest, or should I say they were interested in cheering on Rockmann with totally insulting lines like *“Sir Alois! Don’t allow the Ice Idiot to do you in!”*

The majority of the girls watching probably saw Rockmann as a savior while I was seen as a villain. Ha, what a joke all that was. Perhaps I needed to teach them all a lesson: sometimes the hero *is* defeated by evil.

“Hey, cut it out you two—”

“Satanás, you’re in my way. Move.”

Satanás, who had attempted to calm down both me and Rockmann, was swiftly pushed aside as someone new stepped in front of him. I let my gaze slip away from Rockmann for an instant to look towards Satanás.

“Huh? Well whaddaya know, if it isn’t Mister Noir,” Satanás muttered to himself, irritated at the person who had cut him off.

“I’ve told you a million times to call me by my name. And that’s my seat. You’re in my way—move it.”

“Huh, so you want to go around having people calling you “Prince” like you’re all high and mighty, but that’s just your job title, right? You’re quite something, that’s for sure.”

“*You’re* the one who’s going around acting high and mighty! You’re taking *my* seat!”

Right now, right in front us, another set of people seemed to be about to explode into a fight. Rockmann feinted a gaze in their direction, but as he did so he quickly grabbed my arm and instantly blasted it with heat. Distracted by the other two, I failed to react in time and took the blast without dodging. The heat was agonizing.

That’s friggin’ hot! He’s gonna burn me!

“I’m burning up here!” I yelled.

“Now now, Prince. Satanás is your friend, so why don’t you try to get along with him?”

“AAAAAAAH!” Despite my screaming, I was completely ignored by Rockmann as he smiled and addressed the other two.

I tried to resist by icing his hand, but he must have been using a deadly level of heat because all that did was cause steam, so it didn’t freeze. With my icing it wasn’t particularly hot anymore, but Rockmann refused to let go of me no matter how much time passed, and with flames continuing to blaze out of his hand, I couldn’t let my guard down. When I tried to yank away from him, his grip didn’t slip in the slightest.

Goddammit, this year, I am going to start putting more effort into strengthening my arms.

“He’s not my friend!”

“Yeah, he’s not my friend either. Alois, you’re pretty reasonable, so I can be friends with you, but not this guy. No way. He’s ‘Mister Noir,’ after all,” said Satanás.

“Just how many times do you intend to call me that, Silver?!”

Prince Zenon, with his black hair and black eyes, is full of rage. Satanás seems to be calling him “Mister Noir” half out of envy, and the truth was that he was actually jealous of Prince Zenon’s black eyes and black hair. He seemed to be quite dissatisfied with his own hair, and seemed to feel rather unworthy when standing next to the Prince with his straight black hair. I think his curly silver hair is kinda nice, though.

But no matter how much he might dislike him, for Satanás to go around speaking to the Prince so casually meant he was, in one sense, quite daring. Even Rockmann takes care to be polite when speaking to the Prince, and so I thought he might reprimand Satanás for not doing so. Unexpectedly, he didn’t touch on that subject at all.

Is it really okay? For Satanás to talk to him like that?

“Switch your seat for mine in the front row, I hate it.”

“Quit your bullshit. If you’re going to hate something, hate your own bad luck.”

But having said all that, observing the two of them, it *did* seem like they had a rather good relationship with each other, and like they were enjoying the whole back-and-forth to a degree, so I wasn’t watching them with any sort of nervousness.

Perhaps this was what was meant by “good enough friends to fight with each other.”

“Oh that’s right, Noir—you ranked fourth place this time, right? That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah, and you were last place if I recall correctly. That’s amazing, in a certain way.”

Satanás, who still refused to get up from the seat, acted like the desk was his own, placing his hands on it as he praised the Prince.

Prince Zenon furrowed his brow in reaction to the topic being suddenly changed. The Prince was smart and skilled with magic. The other day, in front of everyone, when we had a chance to show off magic we’d learned, he showed us an S-class Lightning spell. He manipulated the weather and brought down bursts of lightning, each a brilliant flashing attack that blinded the enemy. I remembered all of us being quite impressed as we watched him from behind our transparent defense barrier.

Get hit with just *one* of those and it was “the end” for you, I’m sure.

“But these two did much better than I did, I think.”

Prince Zenon turned and looked at Rockmann and me. Satanás agreed, nodding his head.

Quit it. That’s not what we’re talking about.

Just having *this* guy next to me is enough to piss me off. Start talking about the test results and I’m not going to be able to keep my cool.

Hadn’t I, at some point, felt my pride push me to become number one, all so I could say something like “O-ho-ho-ho! Commoners are made of stronger stuff

than those aristocrats, aren't they? Ha!" That was something I had *especially* wanted to say to Rockmann. Him most of all!

"Alois is first every time, and then Hel is second place, right? You guys aren't just good with magic, you're both pretty smart."

Folding his arms, the Prince was now the one going about singing others praises. Different from the rest of the aristocrats, Prince Zenon didn't pay much attention to whether someone was a commoner or not, and for that reason I rather liked him. Perhaps it's because he's only third in line to the throne; I'd heard that in the future he'd a leader in the Order of Knight. Because his job would be to defend the entire country, he said that it would be just irritating to have to go around differentiating between commoners and nobles.

Just what I'd expect a prince to say. So cool.

"Hey! That's dangerous!" I said.

Rockmann's hand, which had still been holding onto my arm, was gradually being covered with ice. Rockmann, who'd noticed the crackling of ice every time he moved, grew flustered as he engulfed his hands in flames.

"HA! You can freeze all over for all I care!"

Hel's second place, every time. Those words have become fixed and true.

As is probably quite obvious, when the Prince had spoken of who came "*first every time*," he was talking about Rockmann.

And then I, who must hear "second every time," feel the weight of those words on my shoulders and feel like crying.

If nothing about this situation changes, even if I do have grades better than the rest of the noble kids, as long as my grades are below those of Rockmann, who is not only a noble but a duke's son at that, I will *never* be able to say that one line.

Right now I think even I could pull off that biting-the-handkerchief thing.

Gahhhhh! This is so frustrating!

* * * *

I am now a fourth-year student. I'm sixteen years old.

I've grown quite a bit taller than I was in my first year, and my breasts, which were practically non-existent then, seem to have gotten slightly larger.

Nikeh, however, refers to my figure as "modest," while Benjamine derides my chest as nothing more than a "steep cliff."

Just because she has big breasts doesn't mean she has the right to make insults about other people's figures. I know that more than most. You shouldn't go around rubbing salt in wounds created by fire.

I turned and looked over at Maris, who was standing in front of the washbasin. "Hey, Maris, what are you doing over there?"

"I'm putting on some makeup in hopes that Sir Alois will notice me and invite me to spend some time with him during vacation."

"Huh, vacation with *that* guy..."

Our fourth year is coming to a close, and we're going to be moving on up to become fifth years very soon. But before the new year started, we would have a long vacation.

"Us women... You know, they say beauty is in the eye of the beholder... so women are able to become beautiful only because men are there to look at us. You yourself have a pretty face, so it wouldn't hurt if you spent a little more time thinking about romance. That blue hair and those green eyes will just go to waste if you don't."

"Hmmm, you think so?"

Maris was sitting on my bed, holding a hand mirror. She was one of those noble girls that I had originally had no intention whatsoever of getting along with, but in the course of years, we had gotten close enough to joke and banter with each other. Well, I suppose it would be rather tiring to have spent the past three or four years inside the same classroom being hostile to one another, so the fact that it ended up like this is actually a good thing.

It all started with something very trivial, if I remember correctly. One day, there had been a noble girl who, it seemed, had confessed her affection for

Rockmann, but he had rejected her. She hadn't appeared to be going to the dorm even though it was time to be heading back, and since I considered myself his enemy, I couldn't stand someone getting all upset over a guy like him. So I had an idea.

It all started with me talking to her.

"Hey, you know..."

"What do you want?! Did you come to laugh at me?"

"No, it's not that... It's this."

I spoke the incantation for hail: *"karaza."* Right before her eyes, a small, transparent ball of ice appeared.

Inside the ball, snow was falling, and with an illusion spell I made a flower bloom inside it. It was a flower called the "Muse Lamb," and when given as a gift, was intended to mean "your smile is beautiful."

I spoke again: *"Astrofegia."* (Light of the Stars.)

And with that as the finishing touch, a small, dim light glowed from within the sphere.

"It's beautiful."

"You don't need to always force yourself to smile, but I think you're cuter when you're smiling. I don't really get along with him, so I can't say I understand why you like him, though."

She focused her gaze on the sphere.

"I'm going to leave this here. I'm sure it'll disappear before tomorrow anyway."

"What?"

"I'm sure everyone back in the dorms is worrying about you, you know. I'll see you tomorrow."

With just those words, I walked away, leaving her behind.

We hadn't been good enough friends for me to go home with her, and if I had taken her with me I'm sure the other noble girls would have had something to

say about it, but I hadn't considered taking her home with me in the first place, so there was no point in worrying further about it. There were teachers walking around, so I was sure she'd head home soon anyway.

"Hey, um, Hel?"

Unexpectedly, she'd come over to me the next day and told me she was grateful for what I'd done.

"Thank you, Hel." Those were her words.

"What? Oh, uh, sure, no problem," was how I'd responded, acting all calm on the outside, but I was dancing on the inside. For someone who couldn't manage to be sincere with others, I felt quite frustrated that I couldn't express how happy I felt at that moment.

From that point onwards, the other girls had grown to include me in their socializing, and so we'd arrived at the current comfortable state of affairs. They still make sarcastic remarks about me from time to time, but in contrast to their earlier insults, they had grown to include a bit more friendliness in their words.

"Why, during the vacation, there's going to be a party at the royal palace. Sir Alois is the honorable son of Duke Michael Rockmann himself, you know."

Somewhere during those years, Lady Maris had come to be the one who I spoke with most. You really don't know what's going to happen in life.

"Really," I said.

She had, quite on purpose, come to my room to hang out, and was now, on purpose, making a show of putting on makeup in front of me. Doing whatever she wanted in someone else's room, despite the fact that we'd all be leaving to go home soon.

She had auburn hair and eyes, with carefully layered hair and delicately manicured eyebrows, pure white skin and peach-colored cheeks. Seeing her up close like this always left me impressed. It wasn't simply that she was "pretty" or "cute"—she was like a living, breathing, human doll.

Her killer red dress was, in my mind, absolutely necessary as part of the image that came together to create the person known as "Lady Maris." Her magic type

was Fire, and so the red passion of the dress was the perfect match.

“Benjamine, did you finish organizing your luggage?”

“Hold on! I’ll be done in a bit.”

Benjamine rushed over to the wardrobe at Nikeh’s reminder. Once the vacation was over we’d be coming back to the dorms, so we didn’t need to take that much home with us. For me, all I’d be taking home were my textbooks, and they were fairly light. We’d been assigned some homework related to magic circles, so I figured I’d dive right into figuring them out when I got home.

Nikeh was standing in front of the washbasin with not much luggage at all, enough that she could carry it all in her hands. Benjamine was going on about how she wanted to switch out her clothing or some such, and so she was creating a positive mountain of luggage in our room, but for someone who already had so many clothes, I couldn’t understand why she thought it necessary to change out that much of her wardrobe. From what I could see, she already had more than enough to wear on any given day.

“It would seem that his older brother, Bill Rockmann, shall be the one to inherit his father’s seat, and as such, with me being the eldest daughter of my family, I should be most delighted if Sir Alois married me and took my surname as his own!”

“Huh...”

Lady Maris has, for some reason, brought her luggage here, and it’s quite a large quantity. She had three mountains of luggage to Benjamine’s one, and while most of it was probably dresses and cosmetics, it was impressive that it had all managed to fit in her room in the first place. She shared her room with two other noble girls, so they must have all had around the same amount of possessions, but still managed to fit it all in there.

Oh, but that’s right—in our third year, we had learned spells that allowed us to contort spatial volume, and so if they had used something like that to enlarge their storage area or something, I could see how that would work.

“Once he graduates, it looks like he’ll be joining the Royal Order of Knights, and from then on the level of competition will just go that much higher, you

know?”

“Really?” I said.

“Why aren’t you taking me more seriously?! Just how long do you plan on staying flat-chested anyway?!”

“Shut your mouth!”

Lady Maris, who hadn’t been at all happy with the way I’d half-heartedly participated in our conversation, took the opportunity to rub salt in my wounds. *Good grief*, I thought, looking at her as she thrust out her chest proudly. On that point I had no comeback to offer, so all I could do was sit there and sulk. Was I surrounded by enemies in this room?

Nikeh, who’d apparently finished getting ready, turned away from the washbasin to talk to us.

“Come on, Miss Maris, Nanalie’s going home soon as well. We all need to gather at the front gates.”

“Oh my, is it that time already?”

Lady Maris put down the hand mirror, got off the bed, and then put her cosmetics and handkerchief inside her luggage. Benjamine, it seemed, hadn’t finished organizing her things yet, as she hadn’t come back from the wardrobe.

Is it really already time to go home? Feels early.

My time at school this year had sped by. They say that “time flies when you’re having fun,” and it really did seem to be true. I did enjoy my studies, of course, but what I enjoyed most was being together with everyone else. It felt like there hadn’t been a single sad or distressing moment this past year.

“...”

Except that.

If I had to say whether there was one thing I was regretting, it would be *that*: I’d taken “second place again” this year. That was definitely not fun. But that was about it. No matter how much I thought about it, that was the only thing in this past year that I hadn’t been happy about.

At the end-of-year combat magic exam, which determined whether or not we progressed to the next grade level, I had used every ounce of determination and effort I'd had. If we didn't pass the test we couldn't move up a grade, so everyone had taken the test extremely seriously. Unlike the standard competency tests, this one had a bit more of a purpose for me personally, and I'd found it fun. I was able to draw all the magic circles and pull off the difficult teleportation spells without a hitch. I'd memorized several dozen more ice spells than I'd been required to learn, and successfully demonstrated them all in front of the examiner. There hadn't been a single moment when I felt at a loss for an answer, so I'd been sure all of that would be reflected in my results.

"Second place AGAIN!"

But the exam results were the same as always. I hadn't been able to get the top marks.

Just what had I done wrong? I must have been lacking something, somehow.

I had been desperate to know just what I had done wrong, so when I had gone and asked the teacher, he'd said:

"What? Oh... mmm... Hel, I think you're doing well enough, you know?"

"That's not what I'm asking about! Tell me what I did wrong! I'll fix it next time!"

"You're always 100 out of 100, you know. Don't worry about it."

"But I'm in second place! There's no way I could be getting a perfect score!"

But even at that, the teacher just laughed and refused to answer my question. Perhaps what he was trying to convey, without saying as much, was that I needed to figure out what I was doing wrong for myself.

There is still *something* that I am definitely lacking.

Something that I lack, but he, who got *"first place again,"* clearly has.

In a test that I thought scored 200 out of 200, it always seemed like his score was something like 202 or 205, and the difference between me and him was the difference between a perfect score and a performance that merited something *beyond* a perfect score.

Dammit, just what *was* it? What am I lacking?

It's not his fault that I can't get first place. I know that, and I absolutely won't go around making that complaint, because I'd be barking up the wrong tree to do so.

But still.

"Grr! I can't do this anymore! Next time! Next time I will *absolutely* be number one!"

"Yeah yeah, do your best next year too."

Nikeh, carrying her luggage, glanced back over her shoulder at me and then left the room.

I'd somehow become the last one in here. Ha? When did that happen?

We're in front of the gates of the Doran Royal School of Magic.

"Alright everyone, please summon your familiar."

The principal, wearing his signature black robe that contrasted with his white hair, got on top of a platform and lifted his hands.

"Fifth years, over here! Fill in the sides, please."

The fourth-through sixth-year students gathered in front of the school gates. The first-through third-years had already flown home using magical devices. I had come to school using my mother's handmade carriage, but during our fourth-year lessons, we had gone through a ritual where we first summoned our familiars. After that, we had begun using them to go home.

"Sorry Maris, but would you mind moving a bit further away?" I said.

"Why, but of course," she said.

Lady Maris, who had been standing next to me, showed no displeasure at the request, and moved several steps away.

All of us who had lined up according to our classroom placed our luggage to the side, and spread out with enough space between us that we wouldn't bump into each other as we did our summonings.

“*Karomagia Zohon.*” (Summon Magical Creature.)

That incantation was repeated all around me. Then, with small *bangs*, many types of creatures of all different shapes appeared before the students.

“Master.”

In front of me appeared a white wolf.

“Hi Lala, how’re you doing?”

The wolf came closer to me. I lowered my head and she placed her face against my own. Her fur was fluffy and soft. It felt nice.

My familiar was called a “Blanc Lykos,” which was a magical creature that lived in cold regions and took the form of a wolf with white fur. They could freeze objects with their breath, and also possessed the ability to change their entire body into crystal in order to defend themselves.

Magical creatures that had become familiars possessed the ability to fly, and were also able to expand or shrink their own size at will. According to how their master wizard trained them, it was also possible to make them learn different kinds of spells. Those chosen to be familiars were also capable of communicating with humans, and gained the ability to speak.

And so this was my familiar, this Blanc Lykos. She was a girl named Lala.

Maris had told me it was a name that lacked sophistication, but it was several times better than the name she had given her own familiar: “Madorudeeja Libain Sufishcult the Second.”

It’s not like I’m making fun of her or anything. *I’d* never do *that*.

“Lala, take me back home, please.”

I rubbed Lala’s back. She let out a joyful bark and grew a size bigger, then lowered herself so I could get on her back.

I pulled a large white overcoat out of my luggage and put it on so it covered my body. I put on my hood as well, just as a barrier against the wind, and I was ready to go.

“Miss Nanalie. Leaving already?”

“Hm?”

Just as I was lifting my leg to get on Lala’s back, someone spoke to me from behind. I turned around upon hearing that recognizable voice, only to see Rockmann’s familiar looking down at me and Lala. It was a big, black cat with sharp fangs. Although it was a “cat,” it was normally bigger than my Lala. It was taller than me, and of course even taller than Rockmann. Somewhere at the back of my mind, I think, *Everything’s bigger for rich people, isn’t it?*

It’s a magical animal that lives next to volcanoes, a Mavro Lynx. It had the ability to change the length of its tail, and could even stretch it out till it was long enough to wrap around the entire school. It could also spray fire from its maw, and its fur not only didn’t burn, it possessed the ability to protect a person touching its fur from the flames as well.

It was said that dragon scales were firm enough to be fireproof, but in this regard I thought that the Mavro Lynx was even better than that.

“Nikeh’s already gone home, so I thought I’d head off too,” I said.

“Is that so?”

“Where’s your master?” For *him* not to be standing next to the familiar was unusual. It nodded its head backwards and looked to where its master stood among a large crowd of colorful dresses. “Over there.”

“Sir Rockmann, would you do me the honor of spending the vacation with me?”

“It was such a pleasure to spend the last vacation on the islands with you. Why don’t we go again?”

“And then there’s the matter of the party...”

Some sweet smell wafted through the air from that direction. It was less of a “smell” and more of a “fragrance.” That was the smell of perfume. I glanced at Lala next to me, crouched low to the ground, holding her paws over her nose. That’s right, for a wolf’s sense of smell, that perfume was positively injurious. *Well in that case*, I thought, looking at Rockmann’s familiar—but it wasn’t reacting to the smell in the slightest.

“Is your nose alright?” I asked.

“Yes, madam. I’m accustomed to this.”

“Ooh, Yuri!” I said.

It was *his* familiar, but still, I felt an overpowering urge to embrace the creature. “Yuri” is, by the way, the name of this familiar.

“That sounds good. I’ll send letters to you, Zelta. Salia, we went to the island last time, so why don’t we go somewhere different?”

“I can’t bear it, Sir Rockmann! Please make me your one and only.”

He appeared to be totally unaware that I was watching him, and merely continued to stand there amongst all the noble young ladies, smiling and chatting. He seemed to have grown even taller, because he now looked to be about two whole heads taller than them. Because of that, his hateful face stuck out from the rest of the crowd. I kept seeing it no matter where else I focused my gaze. I wished he had grown shorter.

I diverted my gaze away from him, and noticed Maris had also joined the group, and had begun fawning over him as well. The girls’ familiars didn’t seem to be able to enter into that crowd, so they were all standing around the girls, watching their masters. It was a rather bizarre sight to see.

“Sir Alois!”

“I cannot give my affections to you alone. All girls are cute, so I must take care of them all.”

Hold up. Who is this guy?

“But Sir Rockmann—”

“I can’t.”

He took a finger and softly traced it against the forehead of the girl pressing into him. He was, as of now, referred to as the “fungus of high society”... Excuse me, “flower.” I meant “flower.” Ahem.

“Let’s do something fun during the vacation.”

He, Alois Rockmann, the second son of the Duke, was being praised to the

heavens as the “flower of high society.” His alluring golden hair; his crimson eyes that harbored a deep passion, contrasted against skin as pale and brilliant as porcelain; the subtle, tasteful shape of his lips—it all seduced women far and wide. Many had been intoxicated by his beautiful looks, and impatiently waited for a chance to bring him back to their nests.

Pursued by both those older and those younger, all of the honeybees simply wished to be the object of that butterfly’s affection, working themselves into a frenzy with their fevered efforts to deck themselves out in an ever more extravagant fashion. He’d even caught the intense interest of a neighboring kingdom’s princess, and it seemed like she might come to Doran during vacation to visit him.

“It’s all quite farcical.”

Or at least, those had been the words from Lady Maris when she had conveyed to me the other nobles’ opinions of Rockmann. Agh, I had been made to listen to so many of her complaints about him that I felt like I had been drilled another earhole. My head really hurts at times like this when I am confronted with how good my memory is. Ugh, I wish I could just forget all of these inconvenient, contradictory things she had told me.

“Sir Alois, I shall be sending you a letter.”

“Thanks, Nala.”

Rockmann is, sure, good looking. And on top of that, his outfit today seems a little more formal than usual, possibly because he’ll be going home to his mansion today. On a normal day he wears almost all black, but today he’s wearing a long white coat decorated with golden embroidery, creating an aura even more intoxicating than usual.

Well, of course the girls would start going crazy over that.

“Ahhh!”

One of the girls, whose hand he had been kissing, turned beet red in the face and then promptly fainted.

No surprise there, I thought. He’s like a prince in the picture books, after all.

“Oh no! Make way!”

And then Lady Maris went out of her way to go and kick the girl who had fainted.

“There’s Alois, same as always, isn’t he?”

“Oh, Prince Zenon.”

Prince Zenon came over to me, shaking his head in exasperation as he looked out over the rather dispiriting scene.

The true prince has arrived.

Today, as always, he was dressed excellently, wearing something like a navy blue military outfit. Now that I think about it, I realize that I’ve never seen the Prince in casual clothing. I’ve seen him wearing shirts, but even with those he wears a black vest, so perhaps that doesn’t count. In my mind, his “normal” is what he’s wearing now.

“Lady Nanalie, Dame Lala.”

“Dord,” I said by way of greeting. Next to the Prince stood a large phoenix. It was his familiar, and its name was Dord. It was a boy bird. The symbol of the royal house was a bird, and so it was the fitting familiar for the Prince.



“Will you be flying with Prince Zenon?”

“Yes, my lady. My master wishes to wait until all have returned home before leaving himself.”

We were on the King’s island, and so of course there was no reason the Prince had to fly down to the country below, but it seemed he was staying behind to see everyone off. Just what I’d expect from him. Everything he says or does is cool.

“Just what I’d expect from the Prince.”

“It’s not like that at all. I just get bored once you guys all leave,” said the Prince.

While Prince Zenon himself didn’t have the height that Rockmann did, he was somewhat taller than I was, and so I did end up looking up at his face whenever I spoke to him. His masculine and imposing features were not at all less beautiful than those of Rockmann.

Even now I can see some noble young ladies and commoner girls watching Prince Zenon from a distance. The girls who liked the Prince were always watching over him discreetly, and certainly never initiated a conversation with him. They just admired him from a distance.

At me, on the other hand, they directed rather piercing gazes, for the offense of speaking to the object of their affection.

“Heeey Mister Noir, Nanalie, whaddaya two doing over vacation?”

The two of us and our two familiars could hear Satanás calling down to us from above.

Hm? The Prince and I glanced at each other before turning to look up at the sky, where we could see Satanás floating in the air, riding his phoenix. His silver hair was blowing rather charmingly in the breeze.

Unable to disguise his displeasure, Prince Zenon frowned. “Hey, Curly! You need to hurry up and start calling me by my real name.”

Satanás had a familiar of the same type as the Prince—a phoenix of a different color. The Prince had a brown one, Satanás a black one. Yeah, when

we had done the summoning ritual in class, it had been quite amusing to see both of their reactions when they had realized they had the same type of familiar. There had been other kids with phoenixes, but still, they ended up glaring and grinding their teeth at each other, both looking as if they were about to crush an insect. It's quite amusing to think about, even now.

They were certainly friendly enough to fight.

"You're quite stubborn about that, aren't you?" Satanás slowly descended on his familiar. Once he had climbed down from its back and placed his feet on the ground, his phoenix shrunk itself and hopped on his shoulders. If you didn't look closely, it seemed no different than any other small bird. Cute.

"Why do you care about what I do on vacation?" Prince Zenon answered Satanás's earlier question. Well, "answered" probably wasn't the right way to put it.

"Huh? Oh, you know, we got homework, right? Thought we could do it all together, finish early."

"You're *definitely* planning on just having someone else do it for you."

"Hey man, it's all good anyway, riiiiight?"

If we do it together, we'll finish earlier...

Together... Yes, I've got it! "Satanás, I like that. Let's do it together."

"What, really? Sweeeet! With Nanalie there, it'll be like having a hundred people helping me!"

"I want to send you a letter to invite you, so tell me where you live. Let's knock it all out together!"

"Awesome!"

After I had given Satanás a piece of paper to write his address on, I searched for Benjamine. As usual, she was wearing clothes that showed quite a bit of skin. I felt like I had seen her out of the corner of my eye just earlier and... there she was! She was just about to fly off on her familiar.

"Benjamine!"

“Nanalie! Come hang out with me during vacation, okay?”

“There’s something else,” I said.

I grabbed her leg just as she appeared to be about to leave. I needed enough time to tell her about the thing with Satanás. After all, if we were going to do this, it would be a good idea to invite Benjamine as well. She always seemed to hold herself back right at the important moments, so she hadn’t made any plans to meet with him over the long vacation. She could have invited him to come hang out at her place at least once! Satanás had also realized that Benjamine liked him, but in this kind of situation she was the type to completely pull away from him, and so it seemed like he hadn’t been able to figure out how to approach her.

...But still, did all this mean she was really in love with him? I tilted my head, wondering. I had no experience with all that myself, so I didn’t know.

“Really?!”

“Why would I lie about this? And on top of that, we’ll all be able to do the homework together, so it’ll be a two-for-one. You coming?”

“Nanalie! Why, of course I’m going to come!”

She slapped my back several times. It was rather painful, but she was happy, and that was what was important. *That’s right, I was going to need to invite Nikeh later. It’ll be more fun with everyone.*

“All right then, let me know the deets later!”

Benjamine landed a kiss on my cheek and then leapt into the sky atop her familiar.

“Hey, Be-Benja—”

“You know, Nanalie! Even if he isn’t there, I’ll be happy to see you! See you laterrrr!”

She waved her hand and disappeared into the sky above the kingdom. I stood there watching her go until I could no longer see her red hair.

Wha-What was that all about, Bennie? You’re so cool. I think you might have just gone ahead and sparked a little joy in me by accident. For a second I had

seen you as some handsome gentleman, even though you're a girl, like me... No, this won't do. Her name does sound kinda manly... Right? No, no. Absolutely not.

But still, is this... is this love? I place my hands against my heart, thinking.

"Hey, you."

There I was, my heart stolen away by Benjamine's words. That's likely why I hadn't detected the presence of someone approaching me from behind.

"What? A-ouch!"

I felt something slam into my side, and I was thrown onto my back against a wall of the school building. It had already been too late to react when I had registered the words. Taking the brunt of the assault without any sort of effort to defend myself, I had been sent flying back towards the school. The building hadn't been damaged, but my back really hurt.

I had let my guard down at the prospect of going home. That *bastard*, he had aimed right for my solar plexus.

"Caught you off guard, did I?"

Right in front of me, as I stumbled around holding my stomach as I struggled to get up, was the very person who had sent me flying: Rockmann.

Due to the difference in height, the feeling of him looking down at me was overpowering. His cocked eyebrow and challenging gaze were thoroughly irritating, and I somehow managed to find even his white coat that was flapping in the wind hateful.

To think that he's beating me not only in the grade rankings, but also in the height department!

"Could you PLEASE give me a FREAKING break as I'm HEADING HOME!!!"

I covered my fists in ice as I shouted at him and then slammed a punch into his cheek. At this point, I don't give a fig if I end up bruising his pretty face, or even if I knock off his chin all together and make him look like a freaking nutcracker. He *was* the one who hit me first. I've decided I'm going to pay him back tenfold.

I'd been training not only in the magic department, of course, but also working on my physical strength. I never knew when this *fool* was going to come and attack me, so I couldn't just go and allow myself to lose like a *boy*.

"Like hell you are the 'flower of high society'! Sure they didn't mean the 'laughingstock of high society'?!"

"Nnn. Ouch... Did you get stronger again? I go through all this effort to put on formalwear and still, look what you do to me."

"Ha?! You hit me first!"

Right at the beginning of our third year, I'd discovered a book in the library that dealt with magic that temporarily increased one's physical abilities. I'd been so pleased upon finding that, I'd hummed happily to myself all day. With the help of the teachers, I'd often used our break times to practice the spell. Those were nice memories.

One time during practice, a teacher had warned me: "*Don't go all out against a man as your opponent, you hear?*" All I had done was ask for their help, but at some point they had realized what my goal was.

I wonder why.

"What's it going to be, Ice Idiot? Shall we have a game before heading home?"

"Never mind about that! What happened to all the girls?!"

"They're all cheering for me over there."

I looked in the direction that Rockmann was pointing and noticed all the girls were saying things like "*Hey Ice Dummy, get a hint, won't you? Hurry up and looooooooooos.*" They were waving their hands, watching us from far away.

Th-the-the-MA-mAY-k-mE-soooooooooo-n-gry! (Translation: "They make me so angry.")

Perhaps because all of the teachers standing around had seen Rockmann and me fighting many times before, all they said was "Get home before it gets dark," and then turned and went back inside the school, as if they were talking to children playing in the park. The teachers have it rough with all the other

things they still have to do.

Oh! I can see the principal saying something quietly to Prince Zenon. Right after the Prince takes a quick look in our direction, he gives the principal a thumbs up, after which the principal leaves him and goes back inside the school himself.

What they said was probably:

"It's alright. I'll watch them."

Or something like that.

Hold on a second. Was it really okay for the Prince to do something like that? No, it's not like I *know* what they actually talked about, but even if they hadn't, I couldn't do anything that would cause any trouble for the Prince right now.

Speaking of which, I couldn't just hang around here forever; I had to get home. There was no end to this.

"Hm. We'll continue this after the long vacation is over."

"Well, I guess you aren't a complete idiot then. If you had taken me up just now, everyone would know you for a fool."

He lifted both hands in a sort of shrug and sneered at me.

Um, hold up a moment. *You* were the one to start this. The first one to be hit was me. Just saying.

"Lala!"

I pulled my hood snug over my head, and with one, two, three! I was off, flying into the sky with Lala.

"So long, Fire Fool. You better wipe your neck and get it nice and loooooong for my axe when I return! Next time I am *definitely* going to be number one!"

And so, I, who laughed with an "A-HA-HA!" down at Rockmann, who looked so small below me, turned my back on the School of Magic and returned to my much longed-for home.

Next year, I *will* try again.

* * * *

It's been five years since I started school here.

I'm seventeen years old now.

"What am I going to do? I can't sleep," I said as I sat on my bed playing with my hair.

"Just hurry up and go to sleep. If you end up holding us back tomorrow because you're sleep deprived, I'm not going to be happy about it." Having said that, Benamine threw a pillow at me.

"Hey! Ow!"

All I had been saying was that I couldn't sleep. Surely that didn't deserve getting pillows thrown at me.

That pillow, by the way, was a really hard one. A really *bad* pillow.

Benamine was the one who had gone on and on about how all of the soft dorm pillows were "suuuuuper uncomfortable." She went as far as to bring her favorite pillow from home during our second year, and had come up to Nikeh and me bragging, "See? See?" But no matter how I looked at the thing, or rather, *touched* the thing, it was far too hard for someone to sleep on, and even now I remember how my lips had, quite involuntarily, twitched in disgust.

Later on, Nikeh and I had argued for three days and three nights about whether or not it was appropriate to call "it" a pillow. That whole discussion stood out vividly in my memory even now.

Yes, so that's the reason why it had hurt. I felt that if a pillow fight broke out, someone would *definitely* be killed. I sat there rubbing my forehead where it had hit me, whimpering in pain.

I would very much like her to understand the fatal potential of her pillow just a bit more.

Nikeh was lying on her bed, looking up at the ceiling. "I would never have thought that all the dorm roommates would be placed in groups together," she said.

"It is surprising," Benamine agreed, turning back from her side to lie facing the ceiling.

I, who had been cowering in agony, saw them both facing the ceiling and rolled over myself as well, all the while caressing my poor forehead. From my bed next to the windows, I could see the starry sky really well.

“Who’d a thought?” I said.

When you get to be fifth-years like ourselves, you start taking a new type of lesson: “Practical Combat Competitions.” The Practical Combat Competitions were what we called the fights where students competed using their magical abilities against each other in a formally sanctioned arena. They were more like “tournaments” than actual lessons, and were held in a place we often used for our practical lessons, in the stadium next to the school building. All fifth-years would fight each other in that arena.

There were plans for many distinguished guests to come. The King and Queen Consort, the kingdom’s Knight Commander, various other luminaries from the aristocracy, and even someone high up at Harré would be coming. The teachers were all saying that this was the ideal opportunity to sell yourself to future employers. The school had arranged for this tournament with that in mind, or so I’d heard.

It appeared to be the case that if we showed off our talents in this tournament, there was a possibility that, during our sixth year, we’d receive an offer of employment from where we wanted to work.

I’m *absolutely* going to take FULL advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to prove myself!

“You don’t suppose that they decided our roommates based on this tournament in the first place?” Benjamine said.

“Hmmm, you think so? That would be kinda scary...” Nikeh said, crossing her arms with a sort of practiced extravagance upon hearing Benjamine’s words.

The tournament is tomorrow.

It was structured in a two-stage format: at first, all of the students would split up into groups that would contend against each other, and only students from the groups that were successful would move on to the solo battles that followed. The groups, speaking of which, were all made the same way: students

from the same dorm room would be grouped together. In other words, me, Nikeh, and Benjamine would form one group.

“Well, we’ve done what we can about our magic... There’s no knowing what’s going to happen until tomorrow.”

“Benjamine... you’ve got a point.”

In order to face this new challenge to the maximum extent of our abilities, the three of us had trained together ever since we had entered our fifth year. After lessons were done for the day, almost all of the fifth-years had either practiced magic in the stadium, or crowded together in the library poring over spellbooks. Everyone had gotten all worked up as they tried to learn magic more powerful than what anyone else knew, and with that competitive studying, everyone glared at each other with flashes of anger when they made eye contact.

Nikeh had drenched me with her Water magic many times during our training sessions together, and Benjamine had singed my eyebrows from time to time as well. “Oh, sorry about that,” she had said, only to burn them again just a few seconds later. The longer our training sessions went on, the more I felt like I was receiving some sort of punishment.

The training was, just as it sounds, taking pieces of me with them every time it occurred.

“But Nikeh, the real thing I’m nervous about is fighting Rockmann’s group. I’d really rather not.”

“I don’t want to either, you know... Nanalie feels differently, I’m sure.”

“What? You say something about me? I don’t want to fight him either...” I muttered, half-heartedly.

“Quit lying!” Nikeh yelled as she threw her pillow at me.

At some point, all this turned into an opportunity to throw pillows at me...

“Hey! That hurt... Ahhh, but who cares about that! Tomorrow, I get to fight Rockmann. I am readyyy to rummmmmble!”

“Look, just as we thought.”

“Indeed.”

Ugh. Putting those two smug people aside. For all five years that I had been sitting next to him, I was, same as always, still locked in a rivalry with Rockmann. Recently, it had come to actual, physical blows between the two of us—one of us a boy, the other a girl—but I had already come to think of those scuffles as a type of training. I’m not sure if it’s okay to put it like this, but Rockmann was absolutely merciless when he fought me, so in a certain sense it was easy for me to answer in kind. Still pissed me off, though.

On top of that, he’d aim for the times after I’d finished training, when I was most tired, to come and attack me. *My anger at him has not merely built up over time; it is primed and ready to explode.* So that’s why I had tried to catch him off guard the last time he’d attacked me. I’d used a magical device designed to create traps to create a pitfall that had successfully trapped him. With his sudden disappearance from my line of sight, my rage had abated quite rapidly. *With this, we are even.* If he were to do something to get back at me now, I was determined to deal him a revenge ten times worse.

“You were, after all, second place again,” said Benjamine, jolting me out of my musings.

“Second place is fine, isn’t it?” Nikeh chimed in. “Why don’t you try sharing some of that intelligence with last-place Satanás for a change? That boy needs all the help he can get.”

“Nikeh, that’s an awful thing to say!”

At the test the other day, it had happened again... Ugh, I’m tired of even talking about it.

I had successfully gotten second place in the mid-term magical exams that had been held recently. Yes, “successfully.”

Let’s try thinking about it this way: I have what it takes to get second place. Not in either first or last place, but I am, in effect, the immobile guardian spirit of second place. Sometime in the future, after my death, my devoted worshipers might throw festivals in my honor, crying out “Long Live Lady Hel, Goddess of Second Place!”

But having said all that, I still think that first place is way cooler. No matter what I say to try to convince myself, I still hate being in second place.

I don't want to be second-class. Why on earth would anyone want to become a devotee of the "Goddess of Second Place"? There's no way I'm going to be able to stand being in second place until the day I die.

But beyond all that, what I want most is to crush the meaning of true defeat into that *guy*, that *bastard*, who once again took first place. Along with becoming a receptionist at Harré, I'll become a better mage than he is, and I *shall* have my *vengeance*.

While I may be agonizing over being "eternally second place," I am still in the top ranks of the class, even though I've never once taken first place in the rankings. Rockmann is always, always above me, so... No, that won't do. If I acknowledge his superiority, the game is up and I will have lost.

Anyhow, I know that in order to become an employee at Harré, it's not just my grades that are important. I am, after all, aspiring to be a receptionist, so it's important that I'm skilled in clerical work and having good relationships with other people as well. My magical abilities are merely what will get my foot in the door, and everything I'd need beyond that involves things other than magic.

I am absolutely *not* giving up on taking first place, but once this tournament ends, it might be a good idea for me to expand my horizons. If I looked in the library for books that dealt with matters like clerical work or how to make good first impressions on other people, I'd likely find some.

But before I do that, Rockmann, you just watch me—tomorrow, we are going to clear those group competitions in a veritable *flash*, and we shall stand tall at the top of the rankings while you are somewhere below us, utterly *crushed* by your defeat.

"Let's get to sleep now."

"Yeah."

Benjamin came over to me to retrieve her pillow and then went back to her bed. After I gave Nikeh's pillow back to her, I wished them both good night, and they drifted off to sleep.

I extinguished the lamp on the nightstand next to my bed, and whispered to myself a small, quiet, "Good night, Nanalie."

All 150 fifth-year students stood gathered in the center of the arena field.

In the seats surrounding the field, I could see many parents and VIPs in the audience. Just from a glance around, it looked as though around three or four hundred people had come. My parents, of course, were here. Some students from the other class years were also here to watch.

The arena was about half the size of the school building itself, and it had no roof. If the weather ever took a turn for the worse, the principal would create a transparent, defensive magical barrier over the arena that would protect us against rain, so even then we could still use it.

I'd very much like for the principal to teach me that particular spell someday.

"I think we're all feeling a bit nervous today, don't you think so, Lady Maris?"

"Oh my, nervous? If I allowed myself to get nervous, the competition would take me lightly. No matter when or where, one must act with full confidence in oneself."

I heard the aristocratic girls' conversation happening somewhere behind me. Right now, we were all lined up in our groups, waiting for the teachers to give further instructions. The aristocrat kids were in front of their parents and the VIPs, which was probably why they were dressed even sharper than usual. But it wasn't a flashy sort of style—the clothes they wore possessed a sort of sophisticated grace. Nothing like the frilly dresses and long coats they had worn during our first year. Their attire looked easy to move around in, practically radiated an aura of nobility, and, it seemed, had been designed with an eye for functionality...

Anyway, it was obvious that all of them were taking this tournament completely seriously.

Us commoners, on the other hand, were wearing the same clothes that we always did. It had always been important for us to have clothes that were easy to move around in. Practice like it's the real thing and the real thing will be like practice, in other words. So all we had done was wear the same clothes we wore while practicing. It wasn't like we didn't have any other clothes. We were

just deadly serious about the whole affair.

Little Miss Maris, however, has said that my whole line of thinking was “simply an excuse” for not wearing anything different. Apparently the commoners’ determination to win hadn’t come across that clearly to the aristocrats.

“Look.”

I take a quick glance behind me and who, of all people, do I make eye contact with? *Him*.

Rockmann’s hair had grown longer and now reached down to his chest. It suited him, so I didn’t really mind, but the other day it had just irritated me, so I had said in a loud whisper, “Stupid idiot. You look like a freakin’ *girl*.” He had promptly burned off some of my own hair upon hearing me.

For some reason, it appears that I am fated to have my hair burned on a regular basis.

I thought I’d do something to piss him off, just because, and as a result of having done so *many* times for the past several years. I made a face at him and said “dummy!” sticking out my tongue. His reaction was unexpectedly mellow—he glared at me for just an instant before giving me a small smile and then turning away.

Flustered at Rockmann’s weird response, I turned back around to face the front.

One teacher stood in front of all of the fifth-year students. “Alright then everyone, we will be starting the Practical Combat Competition now. The competition will be held as we discussed the other day. First, you’ll be competing against each other in groups to complete a specific task. Following that are the one-on-one matches. But we don’t have time to have all one hundred and fifty of you fight against each other in pairs, so we’re only going to have members from the groups who successfully clear the group challenge move on to the solo fights. Are we clear?”

The teacher looked out over all of us from atop the stage where he stood.

“I’m just going to say this one more time, okay? If your group doesn’t make it

through the group matches, you won't move on to the solo fights."

The teacher had, quite carefully, repeated himself.

For him to have held one hand in the air and repeated himself so seriously, he must have thought he was saying something extremely important, I guess?

"Now then, we're going to have the boys and girls split up and do the group matches separately. Let's start with the girls. The boys can watch from over there."

All of us, boys and girls, had lined up according to our dorm rooms. Now we did as the teacher had instructed. All of the boys moved to the seats in the arena, and the remaining seventy-five girls split up into twenty-five groups that remained on the field.

In such a large arena, our group of seventy-five looked tiny.

"Commoner girls! Do your best!"

"Hel, don't go losing now, you hear!"

"Show them the true power of the aristocracy!"

"Watching girls fight is always a thrill, don't you think?"

All of the boys, who were now sitting in their seats, were looking at us with amused expressions.

Must be nice to be just a spectator.

"Huh? Am I shaking?"

I had been looking over at the seats without a care in my mind when all of a sudden, I felt like something had, ever so slightly, shook me where I stood.

Had I just been shaking out of nerves? Probably not.

It wasn't me that had shook, it had felt like the *ground* was shaking.

"Hey, Nikeh—"

"Alright then, the first task the girls need to do is..."

"AAHHHHHHHH!"

Before the teacher could finish speaking, both of my friends, Benjamine and

Nikeh, had started screaming.

“Nikeh? Benjamine?”

Vines of fire exploded out of the ground. They instantly grabbed my two friends, twisted around their limbs and held them up, suspended in the air. They showed no sign of coming after me.

The slight shaking earlier must have been an omen of their arrival.

“Are you guys okay?!”

Both had their arms tied up and were unable to move. Furthermore, Nikeh wasn’t good with heat, and her face was twisted up in discomfort. Even though she should have been hot, I could see her face turning blue, as if all the blood were draining away from her head. Benjamine was a Fire-type, so she appeared to have some resistance to the effects of the vines, but it didn’t change the fact that they were quite hot. She didn’t look happy at all.

All of the other groups were in the same situation as us—two out of three group members had been taken by the vines and hung suspended in the air.

“Haha, look at all of them hanging in the air like that.”

One of the teachers was holding a book he’d pulled out from somewhere and looking at us like he was enjoying himself.

He was freakin’ *laughing*. What a total brute!

“Teacher! Whatever is the meaning of all this?” someone from Maris’s group shouted. She was watching Maris, who seemed to be about to burst into tears as she hung up there in the air.

“This is your first task.”

“This is a *task*?”

Everyone looked at the teacher, confused.

“Two of your friends are being held captive right before your eyes. You can use magic to cut through the vines, but you can safely save only one. If you save both of them, the vines will retaliate and come for *you*. The vines are designed to burn. You won’t die, but it will be pretty hot. You have five minutes. In that

time, use your magic to rescue your friends. Oh, by the way—for those who are trapped in the flames, it's pointless to try to escape. The King himself has put his powerful magic to use in creating them."

Everyone glanced up at where the royal family sat. I could see the King waving down to us with a smile on his face. So Prince Zenon's father, the King of Doran, had used his own Fire magic to make these vines. It was rather intimidating to think about. I'd never seen the King's magic for myself, but I had heard him referred to as the kingdom's best mage. Those vines probably wouldn't be severed very easily.

"So we save one of them, but what about the other kids who are left?"

"We'll have them withstand the heat of the flames for a brief while, but their lives are not at risk. Their skin may be a bit burned, however... Once released, head to that place up there."

The teacher pointed at the sky. I looked up and saw that at some point, a large, floating glass platform had materialized in the air above the arena.

"If you reach that platform, you'll have achieved this task, and will proceed onto the solo fights. Hey, everyone, quit making those faces at me. Once five minutes pass, they'll be released from the flames. Relax."

"Relax," he says. Even though he just said their skin might get burnt.

"Why, that'll just be a piece of cake, won't it?"

"Cutting the vines... sounds difficult, but if I don't do it quickly, they'll burn."

The kids still on the ground, aristocrats and commoners alike, spoke to each other in strained voices.

"Those vines were created from the King's magic, right? And... wait, did he say they'd be *burned*?"

You didn't mishear that. The teacher had just said as much.

But really, would burns be all they had from the flames at the end of those five minutes?

Those of us not trapped by the vines looked at our own group members.

Due to Rockmann constantly blasting me with fire, it'd seemed like I was the one suffering from burns myself all the time, but in those instances I had usually had a teacher who specialized in healing magic fix me up, so my burns hadn't developed into anything serious. I was really quite grateful to that teacher who had always healed my wounds, without even the slightest trace of a scar. One time, when my injuries had been a little more serious than usual, she'd gotten *quite* angry with me. "Miss Nanalie?! Why! You're a girl, so you really need to stop all this rough-and-tumble!" It was a good memory.

So that's why, in my opinion, it wouldn't be that big of a deal if everyone ended up with a few injuries because of the vines.

"Alright then everyone, best of luck in the next five minutes."

The teacher lifted up the book he was holding in his hands, opened it, and showed the pages to us.

If I looked closely, I could see "5.10" in large writing on the page. The "10" portion changed to 9, to 8, and so on, counting down to zero.

Is this the timer? Is that showing how much time we have left?

When the number 10 had counted down to 1, the book floated up into the air and took the shape of a round clock. There was no second hand, only the long minute hand.

My father and mother were here today. I couldn't spot them sitting in the arena seats, but they had come all this way to see me compete, so there was no way I was going to show them anything that made me look like a loser. Next to the royal family, in the area where the Knight Commander and the other aristocrats were sitting, a VIP from Harré was also seated, so I couldn't allow my mind to wander.

Even if that hadn't been the case, I wouldn't have allowed myself to relax, but still.

"Begin."

Our five minutes had begun.

At the teacher's signal, all twenty-five of the unrestrained girls went into

spellcasting mode. I, of course, was one of those twenty-five. If we didn't cut through the vines quickly, we wouldn't be able to pass on to the next stage, and even after freeing our group members we still had to carry them up to the glass panel floating above us. Within the five minutes we had been given, the time we had to both move and carry our group members with us was limited.

This task. Less of a group assignment, and more of a pass-fail test of the judgment and skill of the remaining twenty-five girls still standing. If our group failed, it would, of course, be my responsibility.

...Ugh. I did *not* want to think about that.

If we failed, Benjamine would be throwing something much harder than a pillow at me.

That red hair of hers looked like it was already on fire. I could easily imagine her exploding in fiery rage at me if we failed.

"What should I do?"

The teacher had told us to sever the vines, but there was a decision we had to make before we did that. It wasn't going to be a quick decision to make.

I looked at the group next to ours. Miss Maris held out both hands in her spellcasting stance, but she wasn't moving.

"'Pick one,' he said, as if that's supposed to be easy. They're *both* my friends. This isn't going to be easy at all."

Miss Maris sounded like she was in pain as she spat out those words, even though she wasn't the one covered in flames. She, of course, also had friends who were important to her. They were girls who had spent the whole past five years living in the same room—girls who were to her like Nikeh and Benjamine were to me. It wasn't unusual for her to be vacillating; it was exactly what you'd expect.

The sleeves on Miss Maris's fine red dress are shaking.

"Nanalie."

I could hear Benjamine's voice through the blazing flames.

"...Nanalie."

Faintly, I could hear Nikeh's ragged, pained voice as well.

It seemed that around half of the groups had already chosen one or the other to save and had left the area, leaving the other girl to the flames.

It looked very painful. It must have been hot inside those flames.

If I didn't act soon, the two captured members in my group would soon succumb to heat exhaustion. The teacher had also said something about "skin burning," so while he had gone on to say that they would receive healing treatment afterwards, the girls being burned were, right now, feeling that intense heat and the accompanying pain.

I looked up to see the time on the clock floating in the air above the stadium. We had three minutes left.

"Is it that time already?"

The teacher had said that the power of the King flowed through these vines, but severing them didn't seem to require sophisticated spellwork. I had thought it might be a multi-step procedure using different spells in succession, but that turned out not to be the case. I had just seen a girl rescue one of her group members from the vines by simply cutting through them and then carrying the girl up into the sky.

"But I want to save both of them."

I needed to pick one or the other.

Even on a normal day, Nikeh was bad with heat. No matter which one I picked, I doubted the other would complain about it later.

Benjamin was a Fire-type, but given the fact that she couldn't use magic right now, she was just as defenseless as Nikeh. It didn't change the fact that the flames still felt hot to her, and like any other person, her skin might get burned.

"..."

I'm good at studying.

I don't dislike learning new things, and just knowing more stuff tends to be helpful in a lot of different situations.

The reason I've worked so hard in my magic studies is because what I learn will be necessary for what I want to do in the future. It was nothing more or less than that. If I had to say whether I had any malice in my motivation to learn magic, it would be that I simply wanted to *crush* that Fire Fool. That was about it.

"Nanalie?"

"*Prost.*" (Frost Armor.)

Once I say the incantation, a layer of frost covers my body and clothing. Every part of my body, from the tips of my toes to the top of my head, and every place with exposed skin is covered with it.

This was a spell I had recently learned from the Ice-type teacher I worked with. I tend to be attacked with some kind of fiery assault on a regular basis, and I had muttered a complaint about that fact at some point during our lesson, wondering aloud if there weren't some way to defend myself. The teacher had suggested this spell, and that had led to me mastering and using it now. Controlling such a fine layer of frost was a delicate operation; if I messed up the spell, it was quite possible that I'd freeze the deeper layers of my skin. The teacher had taken a great deal of time ensuring that I had learned it properly.

In the end, it had turned out that the only Ice-type in my grade level was me. It seemed like there were a few more in other grade levels, but even so, Ice-type kids were in extremely small numbers. For every magic type lesson, the students would split up according to type, so as a result every single lesson was just me and the teacher working with each other. I had felt lonely at the prospect of studying alone, but because I was the only student I got a great deal of personal attention, so now I had begun to be glad about it. I was also glad that my elemental affinity was the complete opposite of *his*.

"You, you aren't thinking of...?"

Miss Maris, still in her spellcasting stance, looked over at me covered in my frost armor.

"You're torn, aren't you, Maris?"

"What?"

I take a step back and try to think once again about what exactly this task is forcing us to do.

I thrust out both of my hands at my two friends in front of me.

“Pagano.” (Freeze.)

The flame vines holding the two of them froze over.

I take one hand and twist it around to direct the spell at all of the other girls who were still trapped in the vines. The magic flowed out to cover a wide area and froze all that I wished it to. Forcing it to freeze only certain things took a good deal of concentration and skill. Even though my body was covered in frost, sweat dripped from my forehead.

I absolutely had to avoid freezing all of the girls by accident.

“Nanalie!”

“Nanalie?! Don’t do that!”

Benjamine and Nikeh are shouting at me, but I pay them no mind.

This is ice against fire, and as ice is on the attack, I’m the perfect match for this situation. The more time goes by, the happier I am that my type is Ice.



“You’re going to be burned to a crisp! Stop!”

All of the vines have frozen, cracking under the weight of the ice. With a *snap*, I disintegrate them all. The instant they disappear, my two friends fall towards the ground, so I cast a levitation spell to keep them in the air.

Apparently all of the vines I had tried to freeze had been successfully covered in ice, and all the other girls who had been left alone, struggling in the vines, were lying on the ground.

“Enough! I’m gonna use a levitation spell to send us flying all the way up there, so just hold tight!”

If I was mistaken in what I was thinking, we might, in rather short order, fail to proceed to the next stage of the tournament.

But to complete the task by saving just one of them and then abandoning the other was something that sounded awful. There’s no way I’d be happy by doing that. Sure, I’d be happy to get that recommendation for employment at Harré, but to get it at the price of abandoning one of my friends? My dream job wasn’t worth becoming an awful person.

But if I failed to pull this off, I’d have done something bad to both of them as well. In that case, I decided, I’d allow them to throw their pillows at me, as much as they wanted.

“The teacher said I wouldn’t be able to rescue you both safely! But really, that’s all he meant—I wouldn’t be able to pull this off without endangering myself as well. But without saving *both* of you, we fail! We have to go up there as a *group*!”

Flames were slowly beginning to cover my legs. I’d saved both of them, so of course the flames would come after me. I’d even cut up the vines holding other people. I’d somehow managed to cover my whole body in frost, but it was melting and evaporating. Perhaps I wasn’t as skilled with this spell as I’d thought. Or rather, the power behind these vines was the King’s himself, so that was probably part of it.

But mysteriously, they weren’t all that hot. If I had to say which was hotter, it was certainly Rockmann’s fire, the barbarian that he was. Subconsciously, I

must have been training my mental resistance to heat during those fights with him.

Nikeh and Benjamine were both looking like they were about to cry as they watched me burning in the flames. I hadn't gone to the trouble of saving them at the same time just for them to make those faces at me. I certainly hadn't intended to make two beautiful girls cry.

It seemed as if they were trying to levitate me as well. When they turned their hands towards me, however, I could see traces of the burns from the vines still red on their skin.

I slowly lifted them towards the glass platform above us.

"Nanalie!"

"This is just a little singe! A weak flame like this isn't going to kill me, and Rockmann's flames are hotter anyway!"

It hadn't been my intention to do so, but at some point I'd gotten used to the heat. *It's all because Rockmann had...* (Rest of Complaining Omitted.)

"Hnh—! *Karomagia Zohon!*" (Summon Magical Creature.)

I made a circle with the forefinger and thumb on my left hand and waved my hand to the side. With a *pop*, Lala appeared right in front of me. I think she was larger than she usually was because I'd wanted her to be bigger. The white wolf looked at me and barked.

"Master! What is the meaning of this?!"

"Lala, take me... up there."

Ignoring the heat, Lala rubbed her face against mine. "Understood!"

Lala crystallized her whole body and placed herself under me so that I was riding her. I wrapped my hands around her neck and collapsed onto her back. One of the abilities that comes with Lala's crystallization is that she is totally invulnerable to any attack, so the flames around me caused her no harm.

She ignored the fiery vines that clung to me and leapt into the sky with ease.

My hair was slowly burning up right before my eyes with a *snap crackle pop*. It

was totally the wrong place and time, but I found myself worrying about what I would do if I went bald. The frost had fallen away already, and as I was using my remaining power to levitate my two friends, I wasn't able to use any more magic to shield myself from the flames at the same time.

There's no way this could be happening! I hadn't predicted it at all, but if my hair went on burning up like this, it'd all turn to ash! My hair *had* turned blue, but recently I'd finally grown to like it... and my hair was being burned up all the way to the roots.

No, no, no! I can't go bald! I can't take it!

"Ughhhhh..."

My hair is, for some reason, destined to go up in flames no matter what I do, it seems.

About two minutes later, the teacher signaled that it was over.

I had kept my eyes closed ever since we had arrived at the glass platform floating up in the sky. Now I opened them at the sensation of the heat disappearing. The flames that had covered me slowly faded away until they were finally gone. Without those flames, my body felt so good that I almost found myself relaxing, but the wind against my skin stung too much for that.

"Benjamine, the fire's gone!"

"Nanaliie!"

Right after we'd arrived on the platform I'd collapsed on the spot, and so wasn't exactly looking around to see what was happening around me. Now I could see Nikeh and Benjamine beside me, looking as though they had both been holding my hands the entire time despite the heat. Lala was sitting next to them.

My skin hadn't been crisped black, but it had been burned to a brilliant white, as if my skin had turned inside out. It hadn't hurt until I'd looked at it, but when I did, I felt pain lancing through my body in flashes and waves. Even the weak breeze caused an agonizing pain.

“I’d said I wouldn’t forgive you if you held us back, but to push yourself this far! Stupid!”

“I-I’m sor-ry, Nanalie. I tried to ease the flames but my Water didn’t have any effect on them. I’m sorry.”

Benjamine’s and Nikeh’s hands were white with burns as well. When I saw their injuries, I forgot my own pain for a moment and felt myself about to cry. These two beautiful girls had delicate, pale hands that had been ruined with bright red blisters. How am I going to apologize to their parents for my mistake? Perhaps I should say something like, “I shall take full responsibility for their future health and happiness, so please allow me to take them as my brides.” ...No, I couldn’t say that; their parents would just tell me to stop screwing around. I guess I wouldn’t be doing that. It seemed like it would be better to assign Satanás to take care of Benjamine anyway.

“I am here to heal the injured; please let me through!”

I heard the healing teacher’s voice as she headed straight towards our group.

The teacher gently removed the hands of the other two girls from my own and led them away towards other teachers who had come after her. When she came back to me, she got on her knees and took a look at my face.

“It’s alright, I’ll heal you now,” she said.

“Teacher...” I whispered.

“Oh no, your pretty face has turned into... I’ll begin right away. This girl spent the most time within the flames so she’s top priority.”

The teacher grimaced and gently placed her hands on my brow. A wind different from the usual sort flowed from the teacher’s fingers. It was a wind that even if it brushed against my skin did not hurt in the slightest. It didn’t take long for me to realize that this was the teacher’s healing magic. Perhaps because I was always having her heal me, I finally felt able to relax.

As I let out a relieved sigh, the teacher instantly launched into lecturing mode and began muttering things like “You’re a girl, so you really shouldn’t be doing things like this...” *Am I really being lectured right now? That’s the last thing I need.* My mother was the only person I needed to scold me for this, that, and

the other thing.

What she said to me next, however, was quite unexpected.

“But Nanalie, really, you did very well.”

“I, did...?”

Behind the teacher I could see both Nikeh and Benjamine getting their wrists and arms healed by another teacher. *What a relief.*

“Now then, I shall announce the groups that have passed.”

While I was in the middle of getting healed, I heard the amplified voice of the teacher who had given us this challenge reverberate around the stadium.

That’s right. I’d been so distracted by my injuries that I hadn’t thought to ask if we had passed the challenge or not.

I take a deep breath, listen closely, and shut my eyes.

“The groups with Sally Bonne, Maris Kyarominz, Nanalie Hel, and Kara Yakkurin as members have passed this challenge. Only they and the other two members from their groups will proceed to the next stage.”

And with that, he finished speaking.

My name was written among others on a large paper floating in the air above the arena. Those were the names of all group members that had passed.

I look around for Maris as I remain lying down on the ground. If she had passed, she should be nearby.

I couldn’t move my neck due to the pain, but by shifting my gaze, I could see a girl that looked like her lying on the ground, the same as me.

It seemed strange to me at first that her red dress didn’t seem at all burnt, but I looked more closely at her limbs and saw bright red burns covering her arms and legs as she lay there in agony.

Miss Maris had apparently saved both of her group members as well.

“Teacher, please wait! What about us?”

The girls who had been first to escape to the platform began to air their

objections to what the teacher had said.

“I made myself very clear, didn’t I? The *groups* that didn’t complete the challenge wouldn’t move on to the next stage. Maybe it wasn’t possible to save both of them *safely*, but it *was* possible. I never said anything about ‘if you save one of them you pass.’ I very clearly said that you needed to save your friends.”

“That is not fair!”

The teacher had indeed said that we wouldn’t be able to “safely” rescue both of them, and he had also said nothing suggesting that we would pass if we saved just one of them. He had been quite insistent and repeated himself: “*Alright, I’m gonna say this again, okay? The groups that don’t pass won’t move onto the next stage.*” And then after that, in the midst of explaining the challenge, he’d said, “*If you can make it up there you pass.*”

“Group” meant all three members. If one of the members was abandoned and didn’t come up to the platform with the others, that wouldn’t be considered a “group” success.

“Some of you aspire to be sorcerers. There are also those of you who will enter the Order of Knights, or inherit roles in a great house in the future.”

The teacher had once again begun speaking in a loud voice.

“From now on, what will you do when your friends or important people are taken as hostages? It’s important to be able to understand the motivations behind your opponents’ demands, but this wasn’t that kind of situation. I’m not telling you to be overconfident in your own abilities, but with the limited possibilities you have for rescue, will you be able to choose one and leap into action?”

“It seemed like the four unbound individuals from the groups that passed were confused at first, but following Hel’s example, all of them made the final decision to put themselves in danger. Those decisions are why we have the results we do. This challenge was certainly a test of magical ability, but the real goal was as I said earlier—for the adults who are gatekeeping the paths to your desired future to see you, the *real* you.”

He must be referring to the Royal Knight Commander and the other members

of the nobility.

Oh, I suppose that there's that Harré person for me.

"There are times when it's necessary to be strong enough to abandon one's allies, but for this challenge, we wanted you to show that you had the strength to *save* your friends. The ones who were captured might not have been able to do anything about how this all turned out, and for that, I'm sorry. For those groups whose members were seduced by the prospect of a false success and made their cruel decision to abandon a member—I declare them, now, to have failed this challenge."

As the teacher had finished speaking, I closed my eyes again and released my grip on consciousness.

Before I closed my eyes, I saw that the sky above the stadium was a pure, beautiful blue.

I feel like I'm about to cry.

"Nanalie Hel, congratulations on taking first place."

That moment I've been waiting and waiting for has finally arrived.

That supreme number that I had sought all the while during these past five years. The holy number. God's number. "*First place*," that title I'd been awarded not even *once* since entering school, was at last right before me.

I'm glad I'd worked so hard to get here. I'd been seen bearing the title of "second place," sobbing as I stood next to *him*, but after this no one would ever be able to call me "Hel of the Eternal Second Place" ever again. It's not like anyone had called me that to my face, but I know what people went around whispering about behind my back.

But I no longer have to worry about any of that.

After all, I'm first place.

"Now then, for the boys: Alois Rockmann, you are in first place. Congratulations."

Applause breaks out. "Thank you very much," says Rockmann, who is standing

beside me.

I am now standing on the arena's award stage. Only those who got first place in the solo tournaments were allowed to come up here.

The view was great from atop the platform, and I could see the whole arena from here. I could spot where my father and mother were sitting in the stands. They were able to see me when I made a really exaggerated wave with my hand, and they waved back. Below the award stage stood all of the fifth-year students. I could pick out Nikeh, Benjamine, and Maris easily.

Next to me, Rockmann is being given a golden egg from the teacher. This golden egg is a very interesting little object. If we warm it up with some hot water, one item, whatever we want, will come out from inside. But the item has to be something that could fit inside the egg, so we were limited in the size of things we could wish for—relatively small items. It was a rather miserly prize, if you ask me.

I look at the egg I hold in my own hands. I'm trembling.

Why, why, why—

“WHY ARE BOYS AND GIRLS NOT RANKED TOGETHER?!”

If we have separate rankings then it's all completely meaningless!

The teachers had never said a *word* about boys and girls being ranked separately!

He had the nerve to tell me to “shut up” after I complained.

“Bu-but—”

Yes, I *had* taken first place, fair and square.

But in an unexpected turn of events, the girls and boys were separated for the solo spars, same as for the earlier group challenge.

Why was it like this? There was no way I was going to be able to say that I'd *really* gotten first place in a situation like this. Our teacher had said something about how nice it was that I'd gotten first place, probably thinking I was tearing up because I'd never gotten first place before, but I felt like crying for a different reason. I really, really wanted to cry.

Ever since I'd become a fifth-year, I'd spent day after day training for this moment when I'd *finally* defeat Rockmann and take first place, but with the tournament being structured as it was, my whole plan had gone to waste. I'd thought that I'd not only defeat that *idiot*, but stand out from the rest and appeal to the VIP from Harré that way, but now...

I don't think that I made a poor impression by being ranked number one for the girls, but it still didn't sit right with me.

It was, of course, frustrating to lose to *him*, but to be praised like I had won even though I was still *losing* was simply insulting. I hadn't won anything at all.

I didn't think that I was losing to *him* in the slightest, but when everyone took a look at the grades we'd both received thus far, the only way of looking at the situation was that "Hel of the Eternal Second Place" had merely become first place for the *girls*.

"Thanks, Teacher."

"Don't go pushing yourself that hard again, okay?"

After all that.

After we had finished the group challenge, the healing teacher had somehow completely healed every injury I had. Her magic was really amazing. I could use healing magic myself, but I couldn't handle it as well as she could. The way that she had taken those scary-looking burns and made them disappear entirely so that my skin looked exactly as it had before was nothing less than the work of a goddess.

Following that, I had remained lying down on the bed for a while, but I returned to the arena around the time the boys' group challenge was ending. It seemed that Miss Maris and the other girls had gone back before me, and when I'd realized that I was alone in the first aid room I had panicked a little.

I'd lectured myself for such carelessness. *Just how long do you plan on sleeping here?*

I hurried over to the doors leading to the arena and opened them. I, who had not known what sort of challenge the boys had been tasked with completing,

was shocked at the sight that greeted me once I found my way back to my seat.

For some reason, half of the boys—no, more than half of them—were lying on the ground nude. (They were still wearing their underwear.) It felt like I had stumbled upon a Nudist Festival.

Yet again, I felt a sudden dizziness at having somehow joined a party, all quite unexpectedly.

“Give it up, aristocrats!”

“You’re the one who needs to give up, you COMMONER!”

Um, what was going on? Why were they all in their underwear? Weren’t they supposed to be completing the challenge?

What’s all this? I’d moved over to where Nikeh and Benjamine were and asked them what the heck was going on.

They answered by saying that the boys’ group challenge “seemed to be something where they had to try to take everything their opponents had on them without using magic (except for their underwear).” If two or more group members were stripped to their underwear, those groups were disqualified.

Satanás was yelling at one of the noble boys. “I’m gonna take those expensive clothes and wear them myselffff!!!”

No way. This is absurd. Surely this is all a joke. What on earth is the point?

The challenge us girls had completed had held quite a bit of meaning, which seemed very different from what was going on with the boys right now. Why would the teachers want to have the “gatekeepers” of the boys’ futures watch this spectacle? Was the point to have them see their burly bodies? What were they thinking?

Then there was the fact that this was a tournament where magic was supposed to be used—what was the intention behind not letting them use magic? After all, removing your opponent’s clothing actually required a fair bit of skill, didn’t it? The commoner clothing wasn’t easy, but the coats and shirts and vests and whatever else the aristocrats were wearing, especially the *pants*, weren’t going to be removed that easily. If you landed a punch on your

opponent strong enough to knock them out, I could see how it was done, but still.

“What a complete disgrace,” said one of the nearby noble girls.

“Oh, but those muscles...” said another.

The noble girls were blushing and covering their eyes with their hands, but it seemed that they were peeking out from the gaps between their fingers to watch. At the sight of the nude boys, their masked identities as “ladies” had completely fallen away.

And then—“AHHH! Sir Alois!”

Without thinking, I looked back at the arena field when one of the girls next to me shouted his name.

He was there, trying to pull Satanás’s clothes off of him.

The very same voices that had been cheering for Rockmann until just a few moments ago suddenly switched to chanting, “Satanás! Finish him off!”

Ladies, please, why do you want to see him in the nude that badly?

He wasn’t getting stripped, but rather he was punching Satanás so hard all over his body that it looked as if he was punching holes in his opponent. It was kind of amusing to see him that desperate.

Among all the other voices I heard Benjamine’s join the chorus, only she was cheering on Rockmann: “Rockmann! Take off his clothes! You must take off his clothes!”

Does she really want to see him nude *that badly*?

Anyhow, there was no mistaking that the spectacle before me was a confused, chaotic mess.

Prince Zenon appeared to be a master at chasing and undressing people, because every boy that came after him was stripped in short order. He was untouchable. The Prince and Rockmann shared the same room, so they were in the same group. I didn’t think it was likely that their group would fail the challenge.

The groups who cleared the challenge turned out to be only Satanás's and the Prince's groups.

But that means there are only six boys moving onto the solo battles. That seems rather few.

The nude boys who had passed out were lying in the center of the arena. I quietly put my hands together, as if in prayer, and thought of them. *None of you have done anything wrong. The bad people are the teachers who made you do this challenge.* It wasn't so bad that the commoners had participated, but for the noble boys to have been stripped to their underwear as well...?

If complaints from the families of the undressed came later, I would not be taking any responsibility for this farce.

Then came the *real* problem—the solo fights.

The teacher had, unexpectedly, come out and said: *“Boys, girls, we’re splitting you up for the solo battles.”* I doubted what I had just heard.

Wait—did he just say that us girls are doing them separate from the boys?

Come on, what's the deal with that? It was ridiculous. For us to have come this far together, only for our fights to be separated. These battles that we'd have weren't with our fists, but fights using magic. There should have been no difference whether one's opponent was a boy or a girl in that case.

But upon reflecting more deeply on the matter, I realized that when he had been explaining what we were doing during the Practical Combat Competitions, he hadn't said anything about separating boys and girls, but neither had he said anything about pitting us against each other in the competitions.

“I jumped to the wrong conclusion?!”

Even so, I'd been totally unable to accept this new reality and began immediately objecting, but he had laughed with an “a-ha-ha” and paid me no mind. The solo battles had been fought separately. The results of such battles had resulted in me becoming first for the girls, and Rockmann first for the boys.

“No more. Quiet already,” said Rockmann.

“But, but... the only thing I had thought about was getting the chance to fight

you!”

A tiny *screech!* sounds out on the podium. I’ve tried to sink my teeth into the golden egg in frustration, but they are quite hard.

The battles with the other girls hadn’t been boring or anything, and both Nikeh and Benjamine had been formidable opponents. I had almost had my hair burnt off again by Benjamine at one point, while Nikeh had shown me no mercy when I had seemed about to drown in her water.

But I had always had confidence in myself that I’d never lose to anyone, and so I had never felt like losing. I’m just going to say this to make it clear here, but this type of thinking wasn’t overconfidence in my own abilities. It was just a visualization strategy. If I thought I was going to lose, I would, and I’d never get beyond that.

Rockmann had been locked in tight battles with both Prince Zenon and Satanás, but as anyone could see, he had still managed to reign supreme in first place.

“Alright, well in that case, once this is all over I’ll come and punch you, so wait for me.”

“As if I would!”

“So you feel like running away?”

“I’m not running away!”

It’s not that I want to *hit* him, it’s just that I wanted to completely defeat him on a formally sanctioned occasion like this.

I’d forgotten that everyone was paying attention to us standing there atop the stage, and we’d begun arguing. Standing next to Rockmann, who was much taller than me, I realized that to everyone around us it must look like I’m some mouse trying to latch onto him. *Dammit, my neck hurts. Why is this guy so tall? Perhaps it’s not entirely due to genetics, but my own father is, quite frankly, not that tall.*

I didn’t have as pretty a face as he did, I’d lost out to him in the height department, and not only was this guy super popular with the ladies, he was

both intelligent and skilled in the use of magic.

...Hold on a second, I'm not beating him in anything *beyond* grades, either.

"Now now, Nanalie, stop fighting here."

The teacher had gotten angry at us.

"Oh, uh, sure."

"Rockmann, don't try to rile her up."

"...Why am I also being lectured here?"

"If we don't finish this ceremony, the VIPs can't go home. Anyway, what do you two want to do after graduating?"

Speaking of which, neither the King nor the Queen Consort had gone home yet. I'd wondered if it was indeed the case that they couldn't go home until the ceremony finished, but after hearing the teacher's words, I realize well and good that this is my fault.

Sorry for postponing your return home. We had a pointless argument, please excuse us.

"I'm going to enter the Royal Order of the Knights."

"I want to be a receptionist at Harré."

"Huh?"

Our teacher had known about my desire for a while so he didn't appear surprised, but Rockmann hadn't heard the reason why I'd entered this school nor what I wanted to become upon leaving it, and because of that, he had on a shocked expression that looked more stupid than anything I'd ever seen. It seemed like I could just fill his gaping mouth with ice and he'd still be making that face. That's how weird it was. But even his stupid-surprised face was kinda good-looking. It suited him.

I had certainly been focused on going around telling everyone that I wanted to be ranked number one, and simply hadn't ever spoken about the future with anyone. Nikeh had said she was going to join the knights, while Benjamine had said she'd become a sorcerer. But whenever I had been asked what I, generally,

wanted to do, I'd respond with the rather unclear answer of, "I can't think about that until I've beat Rockmann!" Well, perhaps it wasn't that unclear, but I'd always shifted the topic of conversation in that direction, and likely had never told anyone about anything else.

No, it wasn't merely "likely" that I'd never told anyone. I was sure.

"Receptionist...? You go working on your magic that much, but you want to be a receptionist?"

"Yeah, got a problem with that?"

I'd heard from Miss Maris that Rockmann had wanted to join the Knights or something, so I wasn't surprised at all. But the way he said "receptionist" made it sound like he was underestimating just what, exactly, the job involved. When it came to things like this, spoiled, rich brats understood nothing.

"Right now, right here, I am prepared to send those places recommendation letters for both of you."

The teacher turned to us and handed us each a sheet of paper.

My name was written right there at the top, and after skimming through the text I understood what the rest of it said.

"To the Director of the Sorcerer's Guild of Harré Mooren, the Honorable Theodora Lockett. Doran's Royal School of Magic would like to recommend one of our students set to graduate next year, Nanalie Hel, to become an employee of your company. This student is highly capable, and we believe that she would be a great asset to you and your company. We look forward to you conducting an optimistic review of her abilities, and hope for your goodwill and cooperation in this matter."

And that's how'd I'd interpret the meaning of the letter.

This was, essentially, a recommendation letter to become an employee at Harré?

"Teacher, is this—?"

"Both of your desired places of employment saw your fighting today and told me they'd absolutely want to have you come and work with them following

graduation. That's why I was able to make these so quickly."

"Hooray!!!"

I, I-I-I can't believe it!

I won a recommendation letter to Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Harré!

I feel all of the uncertainty and stress that had piled up till now disappear instantly. I'd never dreamed that I'd be able to have him write me up a recommendation letter this early.

So this meant that I was receiving a recommendation letter for Harré, and Rockmann was getting one for the Order of the Knights? I tried to take a sneaky glance at *his* paper, but he must have noticed me doing so, because he instantly blocked my view by covering the paper. He was a little too sharp-sighted for his own good.

"During your sixth year, if your intentions remain the same, you will begin studying from materials sent to you by your future workplace. I'm not giving you permission to slack off on your other studies during your sixth year, but just try to do as much as you can and it'll be all good, okay?"

"Yes, sir!"

I descend from the stage with Rockmann and join the rest of the students.

Upon looking up towards the seats of the royal family, it seemed like they were just then leaving, and everyone else around them was shuffling in a little, awkward dance as they moved up and then back down in their seats. All of the parents and guardians of the students who'd sat there watching their children from morning until evening must have been so tired. I wanted my mother and father to hurry up and go home and rest. I'd be able to see them again during the next long vacation, and once I'd graduated, I'd be returning home, so I didn't feel sad to see them leave.

"Congratulations, Nanalie."

I'd gotten back to where my friends were standing, and Satanás and Nikeh and the others had all come up wanting to touch the egg. I smiled and gave my permission. Benjamine, for some reason, did the same thing that I had done

earlier and bit into it. *“What are you doing?”* I’d asked her, and she’d said that the egg had “looked hard, and so she’d felt like biting it.” She really did seem to like hard things.

“Thanks.”

In this manner, my fifth year went on.

But at the end of the year, I was only able to get second place, again.

In first place was, of course, Alois Rockmann.

I had finally become a sixth-year student.

I was eighteen years old, and graduation was coming up soon. From the beginning of the year, I and everyone else had started taking steps to prepare for our new lives after graduation.

Miss Maris said that she was in line to inherit her family’s title of “Marquise,” so once she graduated she would be going back to her “real life” as an aristocrat. She’d told me that she would have her parents teach her how to manage her family’s territory and various other things she would need to know for her role as Marquise. *“I’m the only future ‘Marquise’ here, you know,”* she’d told me. And it seemed that all the other noble girls would go back home and spend their days enjoying parties and having fun.

But should a war or other conflict break out, they were expected to do their part in defending the realm, so they would continue their training in magic at home. Maris had told me that the at-home magic training that the other noble girls would do was considered one form of “homemaking” that they’d need to master before marriage.

“I’ll become a sorcerer, same as my parents.”

Benjamin had told me she’d begin her new life as a sorcerer. She’d spent the long vacation accompanying her parents to Harré, and it seemed that she’d kept herself quite busy learning the basics of getting rid of demons by taking on simple assignments.

“It’s the Royal Knights for me.”

Nikeh was going to enlist in the Kingdom’s Royal Order of Knights, so she

spent day and night strength training or honing her magical abilities. Sometimes I'd train with her. The last time we'd done that, we'd sparred until we'd given each other a good beating.

Nikeh had gradually stopped holding back in our fights, so it had actually been quite fun to spar with her. The entrance exam for the Order had been held just last week, and we still hadn't heard back about the results. Regardless of whether she'd passed or failed the test, the results would, without fail, be delivered to the school, so throughout the whole week, Benjamine and I had been watching over her with bated breath every time we checked the mailbox.

For me, the school had sent a recommendation of employment letter to Harré during my fifth year, and they had accepted it unconditionally, so I was set to start working there after graduation. I'd had them send me materials related to the actual work I'd be doing for them at the beginning of the year, and I'd been trying to commit as much as I could to memory, along with the rest of my sixth-year studies.

When I looked at the reference materials, I noticed that right at the top was written: **"Harré is a place that offers work for sorcerers."** I had, of course, already known that.

The first paragraph described the main duties I'd be performing on the job. First, I'd need to manage all the information clients gave us regarding the job they wanted performed. Then I'd need to check to make sure that all of the details of the assignments were described in the request, and verify each one with the client. Following that, if it was a request for an exorcism, using the information I'd received from the client, I would need to go make a preliminary investigation of the assignment—what was going on and where, what was the local terrain like—and assess what an appropriate fee would be for such an assignment and negotiate the final price with the client.

Harré bore some responsibility as the party that offered the jobs, so employees were obliged to go to the work site before the sorcerers, and with what little information we had, verify the situation at the risk of our own lives.

I aspired to be one of the receptionists, who were responsible for one aspect of Harré's work. It seemed that most of the receptionists were women who

worked in alternating shifts. You might think their job would be just like any other “receptionist,” but considering all the factors they had to take into account—the details of the job assignments, information about the sorcerers themselves, and many other things—they needed to be able to perform all of the work Harré did, not just “reception.”

That’s why all employees at Harré needed to be intelligent, highly skilled mages, or so the papers said.

Huh. So that’s why I had needed to get top marks at school.

“My shoulders...”

I lay down my pen and stretch both of my arms up into the air. My shoulders had gotten stiff. I’d been here for two hours looking at all this stuff.

This specific library was for the exclusive use of sixth-years from the time when lessons were over until ten minutes before lights out. I looked at the clock on the wall and saw I still had over an hour until then. *In that case, I guess I can allow myself to take a thirty minute break.*

Even though about twenty other students had been sitting in the chairs around me when I’d arrived, now the only people left in the room were me and this other boy who was standing in front of the bookshelf.

“Um, Hel?”

Just as I’d been about to let out a sigh and close my eyes for a bit, someone started talking to me.

“What?”

I turned slightly to the side and saw a boy holding a book in one hand. It was the same boy who’d been standing in front of the bookshelf a few moments ago. I believe his name is Titos Hamilton. He’s in the class next to mine and a commoner, like me.

“Hel, if you’d like, I was thinking that we could...”

“We could?”

“We could—”

“Nanalie dearest! You’re *still* in here?”

Miss Maris interrupted whatever Hamilton had been saying as she entered the library. It was the library, so in normal circumstances I would have preferred for her to be quiet, but I decided not to worry about it, considering Hamilton and I were the only other people in the room.

“Why, there’s no chance that you forgot the promise you made me about tonight, right?” she said.

“What? Whatever might you be referring to?”

“Why, just yesterday I told you that I would do you the honor of teaching you how to dance tonight, so you were supposed to wait in your room! Oh my, are you, perhaps... in the middle of something?”

Her dress is flaming a brilliant red.

That was, of course, a metaphor, but the way it flowed, twisted, and turned with her body made it seem like fire. But to get back on topic, it was my fault for having forgotten (on *purpose*) any such promise to learn dancing from her.

“Um...”

Hamilton had frozen up at Miss Maris’s question. I did feel honestly bad for him, so I said that “we were just chatting,” and Maris said, sincerely, “Why, forgive my interruption, then.” Miss Maris was the type of girl whose intentions were mistaken by those around her, but I found her to be serious and sincere at heart, so I liked her.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“N-no!”

Hamilton dismissed her apology, telling her it was “nothing at all!”, then left the library in a fluster. *You know, he had been trying to say something to me. What had that been about?* I’d asked him to clarify what he wanted, but in the end I hadn’t found out. Considering that he’d just gone and left, however, it probably wasn’t anything too important.

Anyhow, I’d been found out by Miss Maris, so I gave up on studying further and quickly packed up my books. I’d only been *looking* at the work materials,

and I'd only been browsing one other book, so I was packed and ready to go in short order.

With only these things to look at, I might have been better off studying back in my room. But then I remembered that I'd also come here with the intention of escaping from Maris. I was reluctant to leave the library with her, to be honest.

"Is dancing that disagreeable a notion to you?" she asked.

"Mmmmm..."

I picked up my books and papers and left the library. She waited for me by the door, and as we began walking down the hallway together, asked me if I disliked dancing.

I suddenly felt the hallway ahead of me stretching out very far into the distance.

"It's not that... Well, maybe it is, perhaps."

"Well, which is it?"

Two days earlier.

Something called an "Apophitis Party" was held for the sixth-years right before graduation. Basically, it was a graduation party.

On that day, inside the school's Great Hall, there were plans for a massive party to be held, and the teachers would be taking care of everything from decorations to refreshments. The teachers had smiled when I'd asked them about it, and one of them had told me that "it was hard work, but still pretty fun."

We students, the guests of honor, would be expected to come in our formalwear—a dress for me, in other words. I need to change into a *dress* in order to attend the party.

People would be dancing, like *waltz dancing* there, but it seemed like that part was left up to us, and only the people who wanted to would dance. With the prospect of the waltz on their minds, all the students who had crushes or boyfriends or girlfriends were going around asking each other to the dance, and the rest of the students who weren't coupled up or even crushing on anyone

were desperately trying to find a partner in order to not be left out.

I could see it in everyone's eyes. It was that same harsh gleam of nervous anticipation I had seen before the Practical Combat Competition.

"I don't really need to dance now, do I?"

"Silence, my lady!"

Miss Maris's voice rings in my ears.

"Okay, okay, I get it!"

The real reason I was so reluctant to do the whole "dance" thing was that I'd actually *never* danced before. I hadn't thought it important for my future, and if one wasn't an aristocrat, it would probably never cross one's mind to think about it.

Since I'd been told that dresses were a "must" this time around, I *had* asked my mother to buy me a dress for the first time in my life...

With students like me in mind, some of the teachers had taken their time after lessons to practice dancing with us. Some of the more generous noble kids had also gone out of their way to teach us commoners the proper way to do all the twists and turns. The commoners and aristocrats had really come around to being on good terms with one another.

Personally, I'd never felt like dancing in my life, and on top of that, there wasn't even anyone that I liked. I'd rather *not* do any dancing that was not required, and if possible I'd prefer to focus my attention on all the good food that would be served.

Besides, if we have all this time to go dancing, shouldn't we have been using it to prepare for our life post-graduation? I didn't intend to yield that point. I'd probably be called lame for saying that out loud, though.

On the other hand, if everyone thought like I did, the party would be a total bore, so it was, actually, fun to watch everyone else get excited for it.

I'm not sure where Maris had heard about me and my situation, but all of a sudden yesterday she had come over to my seat right as classes had finished for the day and told me, in a *very* high-pitched voice, "*I shall teach you how to*

dance!”

I’d told her “no,” but she turned out to be fairly insistent about the whole thing, and had been hounding me about it all day.

Totally unrelated to my dancing abilities (or lack thereof), something else had happened just a few days before Maris ambushed me: I happened to catch sight of Benjamine putting herself out on a limb and asking her own crush, Satanás, to the dance. It all happened in the courtyard behind the school. Nikeh and I, who’d just happened to be passing by at that time, noticed what was going on and quickly concealed ourselves so we could watch. I’d fallen and scraped my knees in the rush to do so, but I was so excited that I hadn’t felt any pain at all. I hadn’t even been the one asking someone to the dance!

Happily enough, Satanás accepted Benjamine’s proposal and they ended up becoming partners. Nikeh and I had teased Benjamine about it once we’d gotten back to our room, but her face had been so flushed with happiness that, funnily enough, we had begun to blush as well.

Anyway, caught up as I was in all that secondhand happiness, I’d caved and allowed Maris to teach me how to dance in our dorm room with Nikeh and Benjamine watching over me. She actually turned out to be a gentle and careful instructor.

“We don’t have much time, so I shall have you learn only the basics.”

“Noooo. I don’t wanna.”

“Quiet, Flat Chest.”

“Shut up yourself!!”

I seem to have a lot of older-sister types in my life.

Only a few days left here at school.

Today we had “independent study”—free time, in other words.

A long time ago, if the teacher hadn’t been inside the classroom, we all would have likely chattered the time away, but now everyone was focusing on the things they needed to do, and it was all very quiet. No one moved to different

desks, and everyone was sitting in their seats, either quietly running their pens across their papers or reading their books.

I was no exception, spending the whole day reading a book on magical plants. *With time like this, I'll try to stuff as much information into my head as I possibly can, study and study and then be able to tell everyone, "There's nothing I don't know!"*

I'd found the properties of magical plants interesting for quite some time, whether they had nectar that could instantly heal any wound it was applied to or were the type of man-eating plant that grew only by eating people. There were so many kinds. Some had poisons that could be turned into medicines, others had strange abilities that one found it difficult to imagine could be put to proper use. There seemed to be no end of plants with magical properties.

Those whose magic type was Earth could, with an incantation, cause the desired plant to sprout from the earth. There were lots of those types of incantations listed in the Earth-type reference book called "Blood of the Earth," but from what I could tell none of them would be anything I could use, which was a shame.

".....?"

I turned the page to the next chapter, and what should fall from the air somewhere above my book but a little slip of paper.

It fluttered through the air down to my desk, and on the paper I could see something was written. *Did someone above drop this by accident?* I thought, but as I was sitting in the rearmost and therefore highest seat, that couldn't be the case. Which meant that someone had *sent* this to me. A letter.

"Hel. After school, I want you to come to the courtyard behind the school."

That's what I saw written on the paper.

The sender's name was nowhere to be seen, so I had no idea who had sent it.

"What..."

And then two more slips of paper fluttered their way towards me. I felt a sort of wordless panic seize me as I saw one slip drift over to Rockmann's desk and

the other one fell towards mine. He had apparently noticed the slip on his desk and was reading what it said. Verrrrrry carefully, I moved only my eyes to the side as far as possible and tried to read what it said, but it seemed like he had picked up on my curiosity, and instantly stuffed the note into his breast pocket.

What's the big deal? Just a little glance is all I need.

Shit, I thought, as I looked down at the other paper on my desk. On it was written:

"Today, after class, I'll be waiting for you in front of the fountain."

Again, no name. What an impolite way to write a letter! If I only knew who had sent them, I'd be able to go and ask straight away what they wanted. But if they had gone to the trouble of sending me *letters*, then it was probably something they didn't want to talk about here... Hold on, what kind of thing would that be? Who wants to have *that sort* of conversation with a person like me? It wasn't Miss Maris's handwriting, so I had no guesses as to who the senders might be.

And "senders" it certainly was, as the handwriting differed between the two notes.

"....."

I now have *two* things I need to take care of after classes are over.

Just when I thought I'd have a chance to get some studying done, I can't concentrate on anything because of those notes.

In the middle of all my pondering over the mystery of the notes, yet another slip of paper softly fell to my desk. *Again!* I read it and knew now I had *three* things to take care of after classes.

Now I'd started to feel a little angry at the senders of these letters. *They could have at least bothered to sign their names. Why didn't they?*

I'd made my decision. I would take three sheets of paper, write my reply —*"Sorry, I have something else to do so I can't meet with you"* on all three sheets, and then send them flying to their respective rendezvous points. *I can't spend all afternoon running around the school, and if I did end up going to one*

of them, I wouldn't be able to go to either of the others. And with that, I'd rationalized avoiding meeting with any of the three people who'd sent those notes.

Independent study time came to an end and everyone left the classroom. Today marked the formal end of our classroom studies, so those who wanted to go back to the dorms did so, but those with a little something *special* to take care of headed off in other directions. I'd popped my head in the neighboring classroom to let Nikeh know I'd be home late again today, then wrote my replies on three new slips of paper I'd prepared during class, cast a spell on them, and sent them flying to their respective locations.

Ahhh, I thought, with this, it isn't like I ignored the letters or anything, right?

"Sir Alois! A moment of your time, please."

I'd been about to head to the library for the second day in a row, but as I began walking down the hallway, a noble girl had hurried past to where Rockmann was walking ahead of me. Her pink dress bounced in the air, making such pretty waves in the fabric.

I saw Rockmann, who'd stopped upon hearing his name, stand there waiting silently until the girl caught up with him.

"Sally?" he asked.

"I, um," she said, hesitating.

Recently, Rockmann had been surrounded by more girls than usual. He hadn't given any sort of sign that he disliked the attention, and furthermore I think most girls found him approachable. After all, he's the guy who throws out irritating lines like *"I've got to take good care of all you girls, right?"* and other bullcrap with a completely straight face.

If he really believed what he was saying, it felt like he was, in a roundabout way, saying that he didn't think of *me* as a girl, so every time I heard that line it tended to get on my nerves.

"Sir Alois, um, would you, do me the honor, of attending the party with me?"

From what I could hear, it was *that sort* of conversation. It appeared she wanted him to be her dance partner at the party.

I was, I confess, a bit interested, so I slowed down so as not to overtake them and listened carefully. The other students around me gave me suspicious looks as I did so, but I just tilted my head to the side and began whistling a little tune. *I'm not doing anything at all.*

"I'm not planning on going with anyone in particular, but if you'd like to dance, I'd be happy to. It's just that I've promised some other girls the same thing, so you'd be after them—would you be alright with that?"

"Certainly!" the girl declared.

According to Miss Maris, for a woman to invite a man was a faux pas in the world of high society. But this is just a school party with no relation to parents, titles, or the opinions of socialites, so it seemed that the girls who wanted to end their time at the school without regrets were really giving it their all in inviting their partners.

"But what about you, Maris?" I had asked, and she replied (proudly, I might add) that she had "reserved the third dance." Knowing her, on any other occasion I think she would have hated being in "third," but this seemed different. For her not to show any displeasure at all about that fact must have meant she had really wanted to dance with Rockmann quite badly. It made me want to cry.

In my opinion, *he* is a very cruel man. If he makes not only me, but Miss Maris cry as well, he isn't going to get off lightly.

It was the day of the party.

I'd gotten to bed late the night before, so it was already midday by the time I awoke. The sunlight lancing in through the window was bright. I "awoke," but it wasn't me waking up naturally—Nikeh and Benjamine had roused me. Even though they'd pushed me off my bed and I'd fallen to the floor, I'd kept on sleeping, so Benjamine had decided it was as good a time as any for her to shower me in a volley of forceful kicks all over my body. *I don't think I'll forget that wake-up call for as long as I live. It still hurts.*

“Ahh, that felt amazing! Hey, Nikeh, grab that for me, will you? The thing you wipe your body with.” *Has she really forgotten what a “towel” is called? She almost never uses them because she just “air dries” in our room, so... I guess that’s possible?!*

“Benjamine, you took way too long! Hurry up and get out of the bathroom!”

We each took turns taking baths in the bathroom attached to our dorm room and began preparing for the night ahead. It wasn’t quite time for the dresses yet, so we had left them laid across our beds.

“Nanalie, take care of my hair.”

“Benjamine, really, stop just sitting around naked. I’m going to go fetch a comb, so wait here.”

A little longer until the party. It was a short while before the sun would set, so we had plenty of time... is what I both could and couldn’t say, given all that needed to be done. There was nothing for it except to hurry on with our preparations.

I ran the comb through Benjamine’s hair, then, while consulting a book, cast a spell that would fix it up. “This might be nice,” one of us would say, “Maybe this style’s better,” another would chime in, all three of us imagining how each hairstyle would fit with the dress while we tried several styles. We’d talked about how it’d be a good idea to decide on a hairstyle several days ago, but being women, it was only natural for us to fuss over our hair up until the last moment. Even so, we managed to pick something that matched her overall look, and did an excellent job with her makeup. Nikeh did most of the makeup work, but still. I helped.

I used my magic on Nikeh’s hair as well, and Benjamine did her makeup for her very prettily and carefully. They were both so well dressed up that while they had been beautiful women before, now they appeared to me as heavenly as the goddesses above. I had to squint just to bear looking at them, so dazzling did they appear to me.

“Alright now, you’re a woman too.”

“Nnnnnn...” I mumbled, hiding my eyes with my hands, and was then told, in

no uncertain terms: “Nanalie, it’s your turn now.”

Yeah, since we got done with you two, I suppose it’s my turn now.

“Your blue hair always looks so beautiful, doesn’t it?”

Nikeh takes a strand of my hair in her hand.

“Hmmm, what hairstyle do you think’s best? You always leave it down, so it might be a good idea to show off some of your neck. What do you think, Nikeh?”

“Let’s braid the back, and let the front hang down a little. Your hair, being the color that it is, might look good if we stuck a few small white flowers in it as well.”

“Oh that would be wonderful!”

Everything happened so quickly and without any input from me. It didn’t matter, though, since the two of them looked like they were having so much fun. As long as they were enjoying themselves, that was enough for me.

They must have finished styling my hair, because now Nikeh came around in front of me and was pulling out her makeup kit.

“Alright now, close your eyes,” she said.

It felt a little ticklish when she brushed her fingers against my skin.

“Just once, we wanted to give you a makeover. You’ve never let us do it before, so we figured this one time, before we graduate.”

“But I don’t need—”

“I’m so glad this party is happening. After all, it’s because of the party that we finally get the chance to dress you up in your best clothes.”

“Haha, my best clothes?”

They were going a bit far in their exaggerations.

Once they were done applying makeup, I changed into the dress that had been left draped over my bed. Benjamine put on an elegant purple dress that matched perfectly with her red hair. Nikeh’s bright yellow dress was a good match with her blond hair. I was wearing a light azure dress that my mother had

picked out to go with the color of my eyes.

It was my first time wearing a dress that had such a low neckline and long sleeves, so I was actually a little more uneasy than I would have been in a dress that was simply shorter than usual. *I still have to put on my high heels*, I thought. *The aristocrats really have it rough, needing to wear this kind of thing all the time*. But that was neither here nor there, I suppose.

We checked each other's appearances one last time and then left our dorm room.

"So, see you later then."

Benjamin had her thing with Satanás, and Nikeh seemed to have been asked by someone, so they left to meet up with their dates. They'd both turned to me and said, right as they were leaving, *"If anyone tries anything weird with you, make sure you freeze them right away. Okay?"* I wasn't quite sure what they were referring to. They should have told me *exactly* what they'd meant.

It was with those thoughts on my mind that I headed, alone, towards the Great Hall.

I'd taken the long way so I'd arrived at the Great Hall a bit late.

On every single path I had tried taking, there were students everywhere acting like they were star-crossed lovers, and the whole thing made me uncomfortable.

I'd started to get a little anxious at being seen walking to the party alone, so I dodged, digressed, and departed from path after path, trying to find a way to the hall that wasn't taken up by some couple. It ended up so that I arrived a little later than I'd planned.

To think that just to get to the Great Hall I'd have to go on an adventure like this. On top of all that walking, I was wearing high heels! Not easy to get around in, that's for sure.

"Hahaha!"

“No way!”

The doors opened, and from beyond them I could hear the buzz and chatter of all those lively voices.

No one else was on the walkway ahead or behind me. *Am I the last to arrive?* I grew a little worried as I stood there, alone in the cold and dark hallway before the entrance. I peeked through the doors and quietly, slowly, slipped into the hall.

There were already a large number of people inside, and while it hadn't gotten to the point where I felt like I was suffocating from the crowd, I confess that I was surprised that this many people had come. All of them, dressed in their formalwear, looked more like adults than they usually did. Looking a little to my left, I saw Nikeh together with a boy from the neighboring class. I don't know much about him or their relationship, but they seem like lovers.

As I was looking around, I was completely taken by the beauty of the decorations inside the Great Hall. On the ceiling were several white lights that appeared like the petals of flowers in the air, and from them, light filled the room. The wooden floor had been transformed into white and gray marble that sparkled beautifully. On black tables near the walls, an array of mouthwatering dishes was laid out. And then, perhaps this part I was imagining, but it felt like the *hall itself* was more cavernous than usual. The teachers may have used spatial expansion on the interior.

I saw my teacher sitting in the reception area. It looked like he was checking attendance for the whole affair.

“Ah, Nanalie, you finally came.”

“Yes, sir.”

I entered my name on the attendance sheet.

*“I think you're close to... No, you *are* the last one to arrive. Now we can finally start.”*

“Sorry,” I said.

The last to arrive? Figures, I thought.

The teacher put away his papers and signaled to someone with a wave. “Hey, we’re good now!” he called out.

“Excellent... Now then. All of you, who have seen each other every day for the past several years, only have a little more time left with one another. All of you will graduate from this school and follow your own paths to your futures. Filled with both sadness for your departure and separation, and happiness that we can celebrate your achievements, we teachers, who have seen you grow up to become adults, would like nothing more than for you to enjoy this night and this party that we hold in your honor.”

The healing teacher is wearing a light pastel dress. At first, I hadn’t recognized her. She made her welcome speech from the podium and then gave everyone a small bow. Seeing her standing there, on the small, round stage, illuminated by the white lights floating above, made me realize how beautiful she was.

“Okay everyone, get your party on!”

The male teacher who had been standing next to her shouted that out, and from somewhere I began hearing some pleasant light music begin to play.

Dang, they’re starting out with the dancing, aren’t they, I thought, but it seemed like it wasn’t actually that time yet, with everyone mostly enjoying the conversation or the cuisine, each finding their own way to appreciate the atmosphere.

So begins the party.

“Food!”

I wanted to be sure to enjoy as much food as I could, so I headed over to the black tables alongside the wall. As I began walking over there, however, I’d felt that *gaze* which seemed to be stabbing into me every time I took a step. *I guess I do stand out, walking around on my own. Even though there should be plenty of other kids here by themselves.*

I’d really rather they look somewhere else. Nothing to see here!

“Exactly right,” someone said.

“Indeed. Maris, you know,” someone else replied.

In the direction I was walking stood Miss Maris wearing her crimson dress. Beside her stood Rockmann and Prince Zenon, and beside them stood a large number of other noble young ladies. All of their dresses were extravagant, showy pieces, and I thought that the girls who were standing up straight, slightly leaning back as if to emphasize the bulges at the tops of their dresses, were all rather daring.

I certainly couldn't do that. Shoulders are the limit for me.

"You look divine, Katorieze."

"Oruku, you are quite something yourself."

I caught glimpses of the partners complimenting each other. The boys had on tailcoats. Aristocrats had, apparently, a way of customizing even tailcoats, with some of them wearing pure white ones, others pure red. Rockmann had taken the conservative choice of wearing an inoffensive navy tailcoat embroidered with gold thread.

"Sir Alois, please do speak with *me* more, would you? It's not fair for Lady Maris to get all the attention."

"Don't make that face. It ruins your beautiful lips," he said.

He'd taken his long, golden hair and hung it off to one side, making his pretty, androgynous face look all the more attractive.

Prince Zenon was wearing a black tailcoat, and perhaps because he was part of the royal family, he had a few more decorative touches on his shoulders and sleeves than the rest of the nobles, but nothing obtrusive. Even on a normal day he seemed gallant and dignified, but today he practically *exuded* an aura of chivalry.

Everyone was holding a glass in one hand while they made small talk. *So this is the world of the aristocracy*, I thought, nodding to myself.

"Oh my! Nanalie, just when I remembered I hadn't seen you, here you are! Whenever did you arrive?"

She's noticed me. Miss Maris called out my name with a smile. Once she'd spoken to me, there was no way I could just pass by her without saying

anything, so I slowly approached her, taking care not to trip in the crowd.

“I just got here,” I said.

“Why, even at a time like this, you still remain so calm, don’t you?”

Maris, who’d successfully taken her position next to her target of affection, was looking at me with satisfaction. “Just what I’d expect from you,” she said.

Entirely by accident, my eyes locked with those of Rockmann, who should have been busy talking with the girl next to him. He’d managed to look over at me while continuing his conversation with her. *I bet he thinks he’s pretty clever, doing that.* Even with all of those cute, pretty girls surrounding him, he was managing to keep his cool, without so much as a hint of a flush of excitement on his face. *Must be because he’s used to it,* I thought. *Unbelievable. What’s he supposed to be, some king with a harem? Speaking of which, Prince Zenon seems to have the same attitude.*

As a test, I turn and make a face at Rockmann, sticking out my tongue, just like I’d done a long time ago.

But again, he barely reacted, or rather, he didn’t react at all. He looked as though he hadn’t seen anything at all, and merely continued talking with the girls.

I guess I won’t have any more opportunities to tease him after this. It’s a bit disappointing, honestly.

“Anyway,” Maris called me back to the present moment.

“What?”

“I’d always thought you were pretty, but you’ve pulled off a transformation so complete, you look like someone else entirely.”

“Maris, *you’re* the one who looks more lovely than ever. My look? Besides the dress, it was my two roommates who took care of it all.”

“Is that so? They must know you very well to have done such an excellent job getting you to look like this.”

“You think so? Hold on, did the music change?”

In the middle of my conversation with Miss Maris, the music in the background changed, and the volume grew louder. Within moments, a space in the center of the Great Hall's floor opened up, and one after the other, couples began dancing. I was able to see Benjamine and Satanás among them, and even though it had nothing to do with me, my heart leapt at the sight.

The girls standing next to Rockmann and Prince Zenon seemed to be their first partners for the evening, as they had linked arms with the girls and headed towards the center of the floor.

What is this, a waltz?

"It has begun, hasn't it? I am scheduled to be the third to dance with Sir Alois, so I shall wait here a bit."

"Really? In that case, I'm going to go grab some food, okay?"

"Those old words, 'fair words fill not the belly,' must have been referring to you, don't you think?"

"You don't need to say *that*," I said, leaving her and edging my way towards the wall. I took a plate in one hand and a skewer with grilled bunny-bird thigh with the other. *Ooooooh, this is delicious. The juice coming off this meat is fantastic.* I hadn't been too enthusiastic about the party in the first place, but with this bunny-bird, I felt like I'd have the time of my life.

While I was eating, one song ended and another began. *Miss Maris's turn must be during the next song*, I thought, casually looking towards the center of the room, but there were Maris and Rockmann, already dancing.

Wait, he isn't dancing one song per person?

I wasn't well versed on the subject of dancing, so I didn't have a good grasp on how unusual the situation was.

"Hey, hey you," I said to a boy next to me.

"Um, yes!"

"This dancing, isn't it the sort of thing where you dance with one partner for the whole song?"

I'd seen one of the boys from my class standing nearby holding a plate in one

hand, so I thought I'd ask him. I figured he'd definitely know since he was an aristocrat. According to him, in some situations it was fine and in others looked down upon. The event we were holding was simply a student party, so it appeared no one had any issues with how people danced. *I get it. So there are a lot of different rules for events like this.*

Miss Maris was happily, joyfully dancing. Just watching her dance like that made my heart flutter as if I myself were also dancing.

"Um, Hel," the boy went on.

"Thanks for telling me that," I replied. "See you later."

And with that, I left him there alone. I wouldn't have minded staying there for a while longer, but the whole saccharine atmosphere of the place had left me feeling a little giddy. I needed to clear my head.

There's a courtyard just beyond the back doors of the Great Hall, so perhaps it would be a good idea to head out there. I, who lived by "acting on impulse," started off into a kind of jog over to the door in my new shoes, careful not to fall.

"Still a long time before this is over..."

My dress fluttered around as I turned to look at the clock. The hands of the clock were far from the time that this would all be over. I felt like time was passing by much more slowly than usual.

"Now then, let's get outside already," I said to myself, checking to make sure no one around me was watching as I quietly opened the back door of the hall. While I didn't think anyone would hear over the loud music in the background, I moved as softly as I could so as not to attract attention.

I slowly stepped out onto the short-trimmed grass and the refreshing air surrounded me. I felt like filling my lungs with that pure, clean scent. With the faint sound of the water flowing in the fountain in the background, my ears felt like they could relax as well.

I let out a sigh, stretched out my arms to the sides and looked up at the sky. Just now, the sky was that color in between dusk and nightfall. *A little while from now, I'll be able to see a sky full of stars.*

I walk over to the fountain, and from there, spend some time looking up at the stars.

* * * *

The waltz stopped, and the teachers took center stage to present their own performance. The first teacher took out a transparent glass sphere that he said “might allow you to see the future” and showed three students who had volunteered their possible futures. Each of them reacted differently to what they saw in the ball, from one student who had a bright smile on her face when she saw her future to another who made a rather dour expression at the sight of his own. Everyone around them enjoyed watching their reactions.

“Now then, allow me to provide you with a little entertainment of my own... The one who I cast this spell on shall become, for a short time only, totally invisible. Hmmm, who to choose... Ah, let’s try this on that ladykiller over there.”

The teacher speaking was the *one person* who had seen Nanalie leave the Great Hall.

It was the teacher in charge of Nanalie’s and Rockmann’s class: Leonidas Bourdon. He’d watched over the two of them in his classroom for the past six years, and among the other teachers was known to be somewhat of a meddler in other’s affairs. If a female teacher didn’t have a man in her life, he would go out of his way to find a good match for her from among his acquaintances, and if someone else was having trouble with the people in their life, he’d do anything he could to try and help them mend their relationships.

He was someone who truly enjoyed seeing other people smile, and if he were to catch sight of someone frowning or looking bored, it was said he couldn’t stand not to do anything about it.

It would seem, however, that he himself couldn’t understand why he felt that need to make other people smile. The only definite thing that could be said about him is that he wanted to make other people happy, and that he loved the students in his class.

“Teacher! Sir Alois is merely being kind to us ladies!”

“Yes! He’s no ‘ladykiller’!”

The young noble ladies surrounding Rockmann began calling out to Mr. Bourdon, objecting to his characterization of Rockmann as a “ladykiller.” *They really adore him, don’t they?* the teacher thought, feeling both sympathy and envy for Rockmann.

But he didn’t waver from his target. He laughed at Rockmann, who hadn’t shown any reaction whatsoever throughout the whole conversation.

“You mind?” Bourdon asked him.

“By all means,” Rockmann replied, smiling.

Rockmann had something special about him, even on a regular day—a sense of composure that was not present in the other students. For the teachers, who knew everything, it was clear that maintaining that sense of composure was difficult for him. The other aristocrats also probably understood how difficult it was for him to maintain that cool, calm exterior at such a young age. No one spoke about it, and not a rumor could be heard about him, but all the adults understood his situation. Rockmann had a sense of pride, after all, and the teachers had taken care not to tarnish it with idle gossip amongst themselves.

But setting aside his social predicament, he’d always worked hard in his studies to take the top marks, and allowed absolutely *no one* to beat him in anything. It was still difficult to know, however, whether it had been a good thing or a bad thing that he had been chosen to be the personal guard of Prince Zenon, third in line to the throne.

No matter which way you looked at the time he’d spent at the school, however, he’d certainly lived life to the fullest these past six years. Or so Bourdon thought.

“Alright, here goes,” Bourdon called out, raising his right hand. The next instant, Rockmann had disappeared from the Great Hall with a *bang*.

Those who had been around him tried to call out after him, teasing him as they searched for his invisible body. The young ladies were all in a kerfuffle as they walked about trying to find him first.

“Mr. Bourdon, what exactly did you do to him?”

One of the female teachers, who'd been set up on a blind date by Mr. Bourdon in the past, looked at him with suspicion in her eyes. Mr. Bourdon had caused her no small amount of trouble with his antics in the past, and she was worried about what, exactly, he'd done this time.

Her suspicions were rooted in the specific magic he'd cast on Rockmann.

It wasn't a spell that made things turn invisible, but unmistakably something else. An invisibility spell didn't make noise when cast. She couldn't tell what, exactly, he'd cast on Rockmann, as he'd done so without uttering an incantation.

She tapped him on the shoulder. "What precisely has become of Rockmann?"

"Hm? Rockmann? All I did was help him have just a *little* more fun as a student, while he still can."

"So you've gone meddling in someone else's business again..."

"Hey, it's all good, right? Alright everyone, let's get this party going!"

He twirled his fingers in the air. "This is the *real* entertainment for tonight," he said, as fireworks began rocketing around the interior of the Great Hall.

* * * *

Night had fallen.

It hadn't gotten cold outside. Even wearing a dress with my shoulders exposed, I still felt comfortable.

The flowers in the back courtyard were beautiful. While it was just a school's courtyard, gardening experts took care of it, so no matter the time of year, it always looked clean and well maintained. The white fountain, the blossoming of colors from the flowers, and the small lamps along the sides of the garden came together perfectly so that everything was in its right and proper place. *Once I get back home, it might be a good idea to try re-doing the garden at home with Mom.*

—Bang.

"Hm?"

From behind me a *bang* sounded, the very same sound as a familiar materializing. I turned around, curious to see what it was.

“Huh...?”

Behind me, for some reason I could not guess, stood Rockmann, alone. *What’s he come here for?* He was holding a glass in one hand, looking at me with an expression of *extreme* displeasure.

...What’s got him in a bad mood? Wasn’t he just having a good time dancing? Maybe something got on his nerves. But why’s he here in the first place?

And hadn’t I just heard that bang that sounds when a familiar is summoned? Did Rockmann make that noise?

“Did you just... summon Yuri?”

“No, I didn’t,” he said.

He still had that sulky expression on his face.

Then what was that noise, I wonder? Well, I guess it doesn’t matter much anyway.

“Why am I here with *you*...?”

“What? Yeah, why *are* you here? Weren’t you enjoying the dancing?”

I sat down on the edge of the fountain facing Rockmann. Even though we’d sat next to each other all these years, I could count the number of times that we’d had a real conversation on two hands. *To think that we’re graduating already*, I thought, getting somewhat emotional over the whole prospect.

Over the past six years, I had worked so hard to try and take first place, and Rockmann had totally brushed away my efforts with perfect ease and maintained that position the whole time. It had felt like a long time as it happened, but looking back, time had passed by so quickly.

When Rockmann would conjure flames I would freeze them, and should I conjure ice, Rockmann would melt it. One step forward, one step back. I could ask for no worthier opponent.

We just argued now, no longer flinging spells at each other. Perhaps we had,

in a good way, grown past that, but I had to confess that deep down I felt a little like it wasn't as exciting as it had been before.

At some point he'd stopped referring to me as "hey *you*," instead calling me Ice Girl when we argued from time to time. He spoke to me more politely than he had at first, that's for sure.

And while his shift towards more polite behavior wasn't *exactly* the reason why, I had also grown to speak more formally towards him. I stopped talking to him like I was "one of the boys" and more like a girl was supposed to. I'd resisted doing so at first, but then I'd resented the way he'd tried to hurry up and act more mature than me, so I'd slipped into more polite manners of expression.

"Something reeks. Reeks of perfume," I said.

"Maybe it's me," he said.

"You were covered in it back there, so maybe it's clinging to you."

An artificial scent, different from the smells of the grass and flowers around us, wafted through the air. It'd come with Rockmann, so it was probably perfume that had rubbed off on him from his fangirls.

"You know, I was just thinking—you don't call me 'Fire Fool' anymore, do you?"

He stroked his chin with one hand, smiling a little to himself. He'd come back at me with that nickname I'd given him. Probably because I'd basically told him that he reeked. *He's still a kid at times like this*, I thought.

"So what?" I said. "You aren't going to call me 'Ice Idiot' again now, are you?" I refused to let him have an *inch* in the proverbial ground of our argument.

Rockmann, this time with a bit of a smirk on his face, took a few steps towards me. "You replied just like I thought you would."

Is he going to try to attack me? I lift both hands, assuming my fighting stance.

"How 'bout it? A little game, for old time's sake." He looked at me, pausing.

"I'm going to cast a spell on you," he continued.

Before he had even finished speaking, I could feel myself floating away from my seat on the fountain, levitating in the air. The sleeves on my dress fluttered gently, like curtains that had been caught in the breeze. The glass Rockmann had been holding floated up into the night sky as well, flying away from his hand.

I hadn't been sure what he'd been intending, but then he'd said that old, familiar word: *game*. I'd been ready for him to do something to me, but for him to just come out and say it straight out like that all of a sudden left me feeling like the wind had been taken out of my sails.

"I'd heard you were a clumsy dancer, but if you're floating in the air, I don't think you need to worry about tripping," he said.

I thought about saying something like, "*So that's why you cast a levitation spell on me? So I wouldn't fall over?*" but another one of his words had tripped me up.

"Dance?" I asked.

"Are you satisfied ending things between us with you as the loser? To think that you are not only below me in academic ability, but a worse dancer than I am as well..."

He's asking for a fight... right?

Of course he is. And I wish he'd quit rubbing salt in the wound, me as "the loser" and all that.

"By game, do you mean a competition of our dancing ability, or our skills in magic?"

"Our game will be decided with a dance," he said.

"How?"

"Dance with me, and I'll do you the favor of letting you know whether you're a good or a bad dancer."

I can hear the music from the Great Hall drifting out into the courtyard.

"This is the last song," he said.

“Really?”

He stands up straight, and with one hand placed behind his back, offers the other hand to me and makes a small bow.

“O beautiful Witch of the Ice, would you allow me this dance?”

I was blinking rapidly in confusion. He lifted his head and smiled, his eyes full of sincere kindness.

“Rock...mann...?”

It was an expression I had never seen on his face before, and despite the fact that I was floating in the air, I felt an instinctual and sudden need to back away in shock.

The other aristocrat kids had done stuff like this with each other back in the hall, but this... *This feels like he really means it.* At this moment, he seemed as sincere and straightforward as Prince Zenon.

“Give me your hand,” he said.

What is he going to do with my hand? What am I supposed to do?

I timidly stretched out my right hand, and he softly lifted it in his own.

“Your hand,” I whispered.

As we were there, his hand lifting up my own, he slowly but surely intertwined his fingers with my own, one at a time, until at last, we were joined together.

It tickled a bit.

“Lay your other hand on my arm,” he said.

“I—but—”

“It’s fine.”

He brought my hips close to his own and we spun once around, together.

The night breeze made waves in the light azure fabric of my dress as we spun together, fluttering gently. I let out a soft sigh of satisfaction as I felt the warmth of his hand against my back, holding me close.

A few seconds later, he whispered to me, “Put out your right leg.” Without thinking I did so, floating in the air as I was, and then we began spinning slowly around the fountain, moving as I stepped left, right, left, right in the air.

Our movements were fluid, yet unhurried. I felt as though I had fallen into some dream where we were dancing and had the whole Great Hall to ourselves.

“Hey, Rockmann?”

“What is it?”

But if I really thought about it, I wasn’t actually dancing. I was twirling around in Rockmann’s palm, and couldn’t be called a “good” or “bad” dancer for merely going with the flow.

Yeah, this isn’t “me dancing” at all. The hand against my waist would touch me briefly, then slip under my arms to guide me, and on and on, my body being merely steered through the air. My feet weren’t touching the ground, and so I was being taken, softly, carefully, wherever he wished.

“.....”

The sky above me was full of stars that looked just about to fall.

Because I was floating in the air, I wasn’t at all worried about tripping over my feet, but for some reason, I wanted to face neither up nor in front of me, I wanted to be looking *down* as I danced.

To be honest, I have no idea where I should be looking right now. I thought about trying to make some conversation, but the instant I opened my mouth, I hesitated, unsure of what words were appropriate in this sort of situation.

Every time I spun close to Rockmann, I felt his golden hair brush against my cheek. It tickled and so I tried to avoid getting it near my face. Normally, I’d never get a chance to touch his hair, so I realized that I’d allowed myself to relax into being very, *very* close to him.

“Thinking of something?” he murmured, bringing his face close to mine.

His gentle, wide eyes were looking at me, his lips relaxed, opening a little.

“Oh, uh, yeah. You know, about graduation and things,” I stuttered.

So this is how close the aristocrats dance with each other. The lack of distance felt rather audacious. With him this close to me, I felt, just a little, my heart begin to pound.

“You’re going to Harré, right?”

“Yeah, but I was thinking that once we graduate, none of us will be able to see each other that easily, you know?”

“Well...” he said, glancing up, “as long as you remember that we are both under the same sky, no matter which part of the kingdom we may be in, it won’t feel like we’ve parted at all, don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” I said.

This is all so sudden. I was stunned, not just by Rockmann, but by the whole way that I was having a *normal conversation* with him. He’d barely referred to me by name before, and his own name had certainly never passed my lips.

“Even if we are unable to meet for one, five, or ten years, nothing changes the fact that we are here now, together.”

He twirls me around in his arms. Unexpectedly, I notice that one of the little white flowers that had been in my hair had now somehow lodged itself into Rockmann’s golden hair. The sight of it there is so funny that I giggle.



He, seeing me giggle at him, brings his face very close to mine, and our noses are almost touching. For an instant, I smell some other scent—not a girl's perfume but some warm aroma that I breathe through my nose and down into my throat, holding it in.

And then he bops me on the forehead with his nose.

"Ouch!"

"I don't like being laughed at."

I let down my guard! I'd let myself forget that he was this kind of guy!

"Rrrgh, at least *once* before I die, I *will* defeat you!"

"Hmmm, is that so? I'll be sure to remember that before I turn into a tottering old man."

"I'll be an old woman by that time as well, won't I?!"

And so, I was unable to get first place this year either. I'd been stuck in second place.

It hadn't been as frustrating to end like this as I had thought. *I suppose if I had gotten first place this year, it would have been weird or something.*

We'd been competing for a long time, but still. *Perhaps I find this arrangement of ours to be, in a sense, comforting.*

This year, same as always, number one in the grade rankings was Alois Rockmann.

Working at Harré, Part One

There's an island floating in the blue sky above.

The view from here never changes.

Far beyond that floating island, I can see that another island of a different size is also floating in the sky.

That hasn't changed either.

What I've wanted to become, ever since I was little—I still see that dream of mine, every time I close my eyes.

I've wanted to become one thing in this magical world for a long, long time.

I've wanted to become a receptionist lady at a place called Harré.

"Nanalie! You start work today at Harré's Sorcerer's Guild, don't you? Hurry up and get down here!"

I pull my face away from the window and shut the curtains.

"Coming!"

Starting today, I will begin working at Harré. A few moments ago, I had been in the middle of finishing my preparations to live in Harré's employee dormitory. Unlike when I was back at magic school, I'll be living on my own now. I've learned how to cook some things, and I feel confident that I'll somehow be able to feed myself with the skills I've acquired.

Still, I'd never thought I'd be living in another dormitory. These "skills" that I've got now are really just patchwork lessons I learned through trial and error here at home... But with my new cooking abilities, I was able to make bunny-bird soup without using magic.

My father, who'd been in charge of taste-testing my new creations, told me that my bunny-bird soup was "so good, it tastes like it could turn into a bunny-bird!" (Not that I had any idea what that meant.) I'd wanted to get some practical advice from him, but all of his opinions were too abstract, and after

getting that particular “compliment,” I’d stopped asking for his opinion entirely. Perhaps I was just pouting, but I’d wanted to improve my cooking abilities, and with feedback like that I’d never get any better.

“Now then.”

I’m moving out again to start living in a dorm, so I pick up my luggage and take one last look around my room.

I’d thought about re-doing the walls of my room when I’d come home after graduation, but here I am, leaving my room again with the off-white walls looking slightly dirty as always. Over there in the corner is my rickety wooden bookcase that anyone would have a hard time calling “cute.” On top of my desk next to the window is a box that has all the textbooks that had taught me so many different things when I read them back in magic school.

Up until fairly recently I’d dreamed of sleeping on some elaborate princess-type canopy bed, so a long time ago my father had taken some rusty nails and hung some sheets from the ceiling that had draped around my bed. But I’d taken those down, and now all that is on my bed is a pillow and a comforter.

The stuffed bear that I’d begged my mom for as a child is safely tucked away inside my luggage. I’m not going to go off to Harré without it.

“This is it, then.”

I take my carefully packed luggage in hand and leave my room, shaking out the long sleeves on my light brown one-piece dress. My blue hair flows down past my shoulders.

With a little *twirl*, I glance back, trying to burn the image of this room, no longer my own, into my mind, and then I hurry outside.

Harré Mooren, the Sorcerer’s Guild of the Kingdom of Doran. The place where all sorcerers expert in the practice of exorcism get their work assignments.

The Guild is located just beyond the King’s floating island, on the northern side of the kingdom. If I ever got lost on my way to Harré, I’d be able to get back on the right track if I aimed for the King’s island. The Royal Isle, the symbol of our kingdom, had actually turned out to be a rather convenient landmark for

me. It is reliable, in several senses of the word. Using it to navigate is certainly easier than trying to find the Evening Star on the horizon.

Harré has a long, long history of performing the role of mediator between sorcerers and their clients. “Harré Mooren” was actually the name of the person who had founded the Guild, and it seems she was a woman. As a woman myself, I am quite proud to go and work at a place with that sort of history.

Our age is still one in which men went around *slamming* their butts down in the seats of power, looking down on us from high above and manspreading all the while, but our society *has* progressed to the point where no fuss is made when a woman enters the Royal Knights, so perhaps the day when we women will be able to contend with men on equal footing isn’t actually that far off.

I summon Lala and climb on her back.

“Lala, to Harré, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After three years of getting around on a familiar, I’d grown quite used to the whole affair. *Ah, to think back on those days when I flew through the sky in that horse-drawn carriage.* Feeding that horse those bits of paper had been interesting, and I’d grown to really like the horse as well. The horse and carriage were now solely used by my mother as her mode of transport for her own work.

My mother had taken a leave of absence from her labors as an archaeologist, with the intention of looking after me until I’d left home and become independent. She’d told me she wanted to treasure her time raising me, but she’d also had a big smile on her face when I left home, because she would be able to work again. My mother loves being outside, studying ancient ruins and unknown mysteries, and is always searching for new answers about the past. She’d been so excited at the prospect of working again that she seemed to have become a young woman again.

So now that I’ve been officially offered a job, it’s like she has sprouted wings, the way she flies all over from place to place. Since I am leaving home today, she’d come back to see me off, but normally she was basically never home,

which had led my father to tell me he was feeling lonely. Just the other day he'd been so sad about the whole deal that he'd cried in front of me, his *daughter*, snot dripping from his nose. He'd been sobbing, and every time he sobbed, spit flew from his mouth. *Nasty. Don't let that touch me.*

Even so, it wasn't like this whole state of affairs was something new. Since the beginning of my sixth year, when I'd received my first, unofficial job offer at Harré, my mother had left the house more and more often, so it was coming on a full year that my father had been in his lonely situation.

I hadn't known anything about what was going on at home while I was living in the school dorms, so I was pretty surprised upon arriving home. *Being left alone will make anyone feel sad, especially Father. He loves Mother so much. Probably too much.*

I'd been unable to just observe the whole situation with indifference. "Mother," I'd said to her, "Father is so lonely, I think he might die."

"Huh... Alright, whatever," my mother had said.

I hadn't necessarily told her out of any kindness I felt towards my father, but rather out of the simple desire that any child has: to see their parents get along well for the rest of their lives.

But once I'd had that conversation with her, I'd overheard her scolding my father. "I don't remember falling in love with someone this *pathetic*." She'd sent my father spinning with that verbal *slap*. After that, I pretended to have nothing to do with the matter.

I suppose there are many different types of relationships that fall under the category "husband-and-wife," I'd thought.

"I'm heading out!"

"Safe travels, dear. Lala, take good care of her, okay?"

"She shall be safe with me."

"Mother, be nice to Father, okay?"

"What are you going on about? I'm always nice."

"I wonder about that," I mutter under my breath, giving her a cheery smile as

I wave to her. I decide to avoid any further discussion about the subject, urge Lala to take off, and all at once, we are up in the air. *They seem like they have an okay relationship, for now. Perhaps they don't need me to be worrying about their marriage anyway.*

"Give my love to Father!" I shout down at her. Mother already looks so small beneath us.

"Be careful, Nanalie!"

The Royal Isle is directly ahead of us. We're having some good weather today, no wind or chilly temperatures, perfect conditions for flying. Whenever the wind is cold, my skin actually *hurts* while we fly. *I wish it could always be like this*, I sigh.

Lala's back is far more comfortable than it looks. Whenever I am flying with her, I feel as though I might fall asleep. It still strikes me as strange to know that her soft fur can turn into that hard crystal. There are a lot of different types of magical creatures, but I, from the bottom of my heart, am glad that Lala is my familiar. It's reassuring to be with someone who can use Ice, same as me, and on top of that she's a girl, which makes me happy because it feels like I have more girlfriends. Still, I *do* have to give Lala orders as her master, so I suppose there is no way that Lala is going to consider *me* her friend. After all, according to her, I am her "master," no matter the time or place.

"What are your plans once we arrive at Harré?"

"There's supposed to be a male employee waiting outside for us, so I'll find him and talk to him, I suppose."

Harré's building is about three times the size of my house, and while it is large, it isn't as big as the School of Magic had been. It's more like a very large store. The brown and yellow outer walls were rough and sandy, but the interior is lined with wood and has a welcoming atmosphere. I'd visited it once again before graduation, and there hadn't been any changes since that first visit all the way back when I'd been so little. My heart had literally *pounded* with excitement at the thought that I'd be working there. It felt like that time when I'd seen that receptionist lady as a kid.

I can see different parts of the kingdom below me as I fly through the sky. The

food markets are bustling, likely because of the morning rush, and I hear the lively voices of the old men and women selling vegetables.

“This is a *great* buy!”

“We’ve got better deals over here!”

Fighting over their low prices again, aren’t they?

I feel like the last time I’d been to this market, they’d been fighting and throwing their goods at each other. The customers had run away screaming. *Not sure what they’d gained by doing that.*

“What are you talking about? I’ve got cheaper stuff over HERE!”

People had gathered at the center of the kingdom. The houses here are built in regular circles, spaced farther and farther out from the center. Doran was surrounded by a large forest, so we’re sometimes called the Kingdom in the Woods. I think it’s a rather mystical nickname. I love it.

But in those woods live demons, and the people living nearest to the forest’s edge are often caused no end of trouble by the demons and their mischief. Even if we try to put up some sort of magical barrier, it will eventually be broken through by something or other, so it isn’t that effective of a defense.

We humans, however, can use magic. We have what it takes to stop demons.

Even so, we still haven’t figured out how to completely root out a demon infestation. Furthermore, there are people who make their living by killing demons, so consigning *all* demons to oblivion might not actually be the right thing to do, or that’s at least what some people said... *Adults can be idiots, sometimes.*

That whole line of thinking basically followed from the idea that “if evil does not exist, good doesn’t either.” Some people’s whole way of life would lose meaning without something to fight against. Still, it’s clearly better for society for demons to be eradicated, rather than to protect their existence as some sort of jobs program. *If the demon killers just looked for other jobs, they’d find plenty of them! It’s not like you can’t make a living in this world unless you go about killing things. I can’t understand that whole line of thinking at all.* The fact that some people think we shouldn’t eradicate demons is proof enough, in my mind,

that there truly are humans more terrifying than demons.

Speaking of demons, last year I read a report at school that had discussed research on demons. The title of the report had been:

“Lifeforms Full of Wickedness and Evil: Grotesque Beings Different from Magical Creatures.”

The author of the report had been an old man by the name of “Aristo Pyguri”:

First, an introduction: The creatures we call “demons” are true to their name—they are grotesque beings, existences that twist the very definition of what it means to be “alive.” They are monsters that threaten our way of life and cause disasters that endanger our very civilization. They are, truly, “Creatures of the Devil.” Thus, demons.

Distinguishing them from magical creatures may seem difficult at first, but it becomes easier by comparing parameters such as lethality, physical traits, and magical ability.

Classifying demons themselves into different types, however, is a futile pursuit. The one thing we know about them is this: demons live by consuming those with magical ability. That is why they attack and eat both humans and magical creatures. They do not consume grass or anything else that is not touched by magic.

The purpose of this research was to discover how, precisely, demons come into existence. To find the answer, I dissected the corpse of a demon.

The results of that dissection would have shocked anyone: the demon I cut open had formerly been a human.

It is not clear whether or not a sudden transformation had occurred to make a human into this demon. Upon first viewing the demon, I had believed there to be no possibility that the creature had once been a human, given that the structure of its body was clearly that of a four-legged beast. It had sharp fangs and a green and sticky hide.

But during the course of the autopsy, I observed that the internal organs and genitalia were those of a sort only seen in humans. In the judgment my team and I made, a male human had transformed to become the demon we were

investigating.

The bones were unmistakably those of a human. The thing seemed to have forcibly altered the bone structure of the original human to make itself walk on all four legs.

We still do not know how this particular demon came to take on its grotesque form, but we do know this: it is no longer so strange an idea to think that the things we call ‘demons’ are actually creatures that we humans, wielders of magical powers, become.

Those last few paragraphs had been how the research paper concluded.

“Research report?” More like “major new discovery.” The old man had written rather disturbing things in that paper.

Sure, it’d made me rethink what I knew about demons, but wasn’t it a little farfetched to claim that humans could become demons?

One of the unique features of demons is that while they cannot reproduce, they do possess a supernatural ability to recover from their injuries. Further, while they may take on many different shapes and forms, it isn’t possible to classify them by saying that “those that look like this, act like that” or anything like that. They attacked and consumed anything and everything with magical ability. All of them, without exception. Why they existed, or what their existence meant, for that matter, is unclear.

But I suppose we humans are the same in that respect.

Humans know neither why they come into being nor for what purpose they exist. Perhaps that is why, as the author would say, it isn’t strange at all to imagine that a human had become a demon.

“Master, I have sighted our destination.”

“Oh! Look, it’s Harré!”

I squint my eyes a little as I look ahead. Harré is located a little ways beyond the area directly below the Royal Isle.

Now I’ll finally be able to take my second step towards becoming a receptionist lady!

The world around me seems so dazzling to me in this moment. I rub Lala's back, smiling.

"Welcome, Ms. Hel. Allow me to re-introduce myself: I am Theodora Rocktiss, Director of Harré Mooren, the Sorcerer's Guild of the Kingdom of Doran."

We are in a room at Harré's Sorcerer's Guild.

A small wooden carving of a lynx stands on her desk. There are blue stones set into the areas where its eyes should be. *Are those actually gems? They look expensive, so I think I'll avoid touching them. I suppose I shouldn't play with the lit candle next to it either.*

The carpet on the floor is red and green. The colors match the wooden walls and floor rather nicely. The bookcase in the room is very large, quite different from the worn out thing I used to have at home, and the books are protected by a glass case apparently designed to prevent stray hands from pulling the books out at random. *She must have at least ten times more books than I do.*

In the middle of this room we are in, a tall, brown-haired woman is standing in front of me, smiling.

"Pleasure to meet you," I say. "My name is Nanalie Hel. I look forward to beginning my work here today."

Just a few moments ago, I'd dismounted from Lala upon our arrival at Harré. In front of the building there had been standing a male employee, who promptly led me inside. All of the employees had been wearing uniforms, the men in black and the women in white. But the exact design of the clothes had been unique to each person—some of the women were wearing dresses, others were wearing pants, and all of them had parts of their outfits that greatly differed from one another.

The man who'd shown me around had been wearing a loose black coat, and while just that detail hadn't been enough to make him stand out from a crowd, he also had three vertical white lines embossed on his shoulder, which had instantly marked him out as a Harré employee.

That was one of the other rules that applied to the uniforms: not only were they all either black or white, they also all had three stripes on them. Each of the stripes had a special meaning, symbolizing the three articles of faith all Harré employees kept in mind while going about their sorcerous work:

First: Always be looking ahead.

Second: Do not overstep your bounds.

Third: Keep your heart pure and make your intentions clear.

“Take those lines and etch them onto your heart before you use magic,” Harré Mooren had taught. Supposedly.

Basically, Harré employees are supposed to predict what is going to happen before they use magic, make sure they don’t go beyond their predictions, and use their magic in the pursuit of justice and never resort to using any sort of *unnatural* power. Whatever that means. In other words, “don’t use magic for bad stuff.”

This had all been written in the materials that had been sent for me to read at school during my last year. I’d nodded to myself with an impressed *“oho”* when I’d read those lines.

“We’ll have you start working tomorrow, so for today, after you’ve dropped off your things in the dorm, I’ll be guiding you around the Sorcerer’s Guild, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I try to maintain perfect posture as the beautiful Director addresses me. I’m actually inside her office right now so I can meet her “officially” as a new employee. I’m not quite as nervous as I was when I first met her, but I am still far from relaxed.

“Alright then, excellent. Here’s the key to your dorm room. Don’t lose it, okay?”

“Understood.”

“Everyone’s always telling me that keys are so old-fashioned, and we should be switching to an incantation system to unlock our doors, but keys feel kinda

good in their own way, don't you think?"

Having said that, the Director takes out a small golden key attached to a red ribbon and hands it to me.

"Thank you very much, Director."

Director Rocktiss.

I've met her three times. Including today, this is the fourth time.

The first time had been during the fifth-year tournament, the second time had been during the long break before my sixth year, and the third had been right after I'd graduated.

The very first time she'd met me, back when she'd seen me fighting in the tournaments, she'd held my hand and taken me aside to greet me personally. "If someone as amazing as you is interested in coming to work at Harré, I thought it best to meet you face to face!" It appeared that the only student who had formally declared their interest in working at Harré had been me, and now they had fewer people available to take care of the work than they'd had in the past. Almost all of the graduating students had been joining the Order of Knights. I remember that the Knight Commander, who'd been watching us from far off that day, had glared over at the Director with something like hatred on his face while we were meeting. It seemed like a lot had gone on between them.

Nikeh had also chosen the Order of Knights over Harré. I'd known that there were a lot of Order hopefuls among the other students, but to think that I was the only one to apply to Harré was rather shocking.

It seemed as though she'd heard from my teachers that I'd dreamed about becoming a receptionist. The first thing she'd said to me when we'd met was "Ahhhh, young lady, welcome to RECEPTION!"

No one could blame me for feeling like running away from the dread she'd inspired in me with those words.

As director, she is the leader of Harré's Sorcerer's Guild, an amazing person who truly is a fitting member of the "Top One Hundred Sublime Mages of the Modern Age." To see her standing shoulder-to-shoulder with all of the other

great heroes in the world made me admire her all the more.

“But before all that, we’ve got to make you your own uniform and magical device.”

She holds her head to one side, hand on chin, looks at me, and “*hmmm*”s to herself.

I thought that I’d set aside my luggage so that I could have someone guide me around, but it seems like we haven’t gotten to that point yet.

The flame of the candle next to me flickers in the air, silent.

“‘Uniform’ and ‘magical device,’ you say?”

“Yes, your own.”

Huh? Uniform?

While I had assumed they would supply me with a uniform, what did she mean by “making” me one? I know that all the employees have different uniform designs, but will they allow me to customize it? I allow myself to daydream a little. *For me, I’d like something like this, and then I want that like this.* If they are going to let me do that, Harré really is an amazing place. *They really do go above and beyond for their employees here, don’t they? The amount I’d been quoted for the salary was pretty good as well, wasn’t it?* That amount had just been something written in the study materials I’d been sent, but still.

What had she meant by “magical device?” What am I supposed to use it for? And for her to say that she would “make it” now... This whole part of the process hadn’t been written in the materials. It’s making me a little nervous.

No, it’s all good, it’s been my dream my whole life to be a receptionist lady, so stay calm Nanalie, stay calm. I need to become the type of person who can shrug off anything with a smile, no matter what happens.

“Ms. Hel. Please place both of your hands on this sphere.”

Director Rocktiss gives me a rather self-satisfied look, head still cocked to one side. She opens up the doors on a red cabinet standing in one corner of the room, right next to the bookshelf.

“Water?”

A sphere of water floats out of the cabinet into the center of the room. It grows larger and larger until it is as wide as I am tall. *Boing, boing!* The sphere makes sounds as it floats before me. It feels like I am looking into a fish tank, only there is no glass between me and the water.

“Touch it, okay?”

Trembling in fear, I stretch out one hand to touch the water’s surface.

The Director told me to touch it, but...

Without thinking, I look over at the person standing near the door. A man in his forties with glasses, he had been the one who’d brought me here. He notices me looking over at him and gestures with both hands towards the sphere. “Quickly now,” he says, smiling.

I turn to ask the Director a question.

“Um, is it really alright for me to touch this?”

“This is called the *Gígnesthai Nero*, the Water of Creation. It is something that was made by the first director, Harré Mooren. Any mage who I allow to touch this sphere shall be granted weapon and wear suited to them.”

“‘Weapon and wear,’ you say?”

“The ‘wear’ is the uniform everyone wears here. I hope you find the weapon useful in your work beyond the guild halls,” she says.

Employees that go around with weapons and dressed in what basically sounds like armor...?

Based on the description of the job, I knew that it involved some dangerous work, but to think this much preparation goes on behind the scenes is both impressive and concerning at the same time.

So those “uniforms” are armor after all.

I touch the sphere with both hands. It feels like normal, cool water. My hands feel like they are getting wet. When I look over at Director Rocktiss, I can see that she’s started to quietly chant something like an incantation.

“Something’s come out of it!” I say.

From inside the sphere—*is that the edge of a staff?*—something is poking out.

Wha-What’s that? I lean my head back, away from the sphere.

But the Director urges me to grab hold of the staff, so I remove my hands from the sphere and grab onto the edge of the staff, pulling it out of the water. Its surface feels as hard and cold as iron.

I’ve just pulled out something that is almost as tall as I am. A long, silver staff, one that looks a little expensive.

It’s a staff. Just a staff.

Upon looking at it closely, I can tell that it has a beautiful design etched on its surface, but no matter how I twist and turn it around, I can see that it was just a staff.

“Oh my, is that the *Dare Rabdos (Cudgel of the Goddess)?*”

“Cudgel?”

“It’s not just a *cudgel*, it’s the Cudgel of the Goddess.”

A cudgel. A kind of heavy stick, in other words.

It’s nice to have something from a goddess, but “cudgel” seems rather violent. The only image that pops into my head is of some woman running around swinging her big stick, spitting fire to terrify her enemies. *She’s running pretty fast. Running around, fast, carrying her big stick. Excuse me, “cudgel.”*

I have to use both hands to hold the thing, but I have no idea what I should do with it, so I hesitantly hold it out and offer it to the Director. She quickly tells me “That is now *yours*,” quite pointedly, and refuses to take it.

“That cudgel can absorb any magic circle that you have drawn. That way you don’t have to draw them by hand out in the field—just stick it in the ground and you’ll be able to use the desired magic circle, instantly.”

“It absorbs magic circles?”

Generally speaking, you can’t use magic without drawing the right magic circle on paper or on the ground, by hand. No incantation exists that will draw

the circles for you, but there do exist incantations that will let you use magic without drawing magic circles. Perhaps that's why most mages didn't generally like using magic circles, and those that did use them tended to prepare the magic circles on paper, and then carry those papers around whenever they wished to use them.

But with the Cudgel of the Goddess, it sounds like I'll be able to do away with those inconveniences. *Maybe this isn't such a bad tool after all.*

"Other than that, hmmm, yes, the only other thing you can use it for is to give your enemies a good beating, I suppose."

"It is a cudgel, after all."

To think that "other than that," that is all it was good for. *Good God, why this? For me?*

"It's a good weapon, you know. Slash it, and it becomes a sword. Block with it, and it becomes a shield. Stab with it, and it becomes a spear. You should try practicing with it later," she adds, but I am already looking back at the water sphere. It's glowing, and to my surprise, so are my clothes. Their shapes and colors are shifting, even as I still wear them on my body. The light brown of my dress turns into white, and my sleeves and collar are, slowly but surely, transforming.

"Is this... my uniform?" I ask.

I am now wearing a knee-length, white one-piece dress that has a large hood attached. The sleeves are closely fitted around my arms, but the edges of the sleeves around my wrists billow about gracefully as I turn. The hems of the sleeves have blue lines embroidered into them. My shoes now extend up to just below my calves—they've become boots, in other words—and have turned white. I find that a light brown leather belt is now wrapped around my waist as well.

"Hmm? What's this? Forgive me, I need to fix this."

She apologizes to me, for what I didn't yet understand, and then lightning begins to spark from her hands. She holds up her hands and poses there, facing me, almost as if she is about to attack me... *Hold on, what?*

“Di-Director? What are you doing with that lightning?!”

“It’s alright,” she says.

“What about this is ‘alright’?!”

Even though we’re in the middle of having a conversation, the Director suddenly sends a flash of lightning arcing towards me.

I can’t do this anymore. Maybe I’m not at Harré at all, but in the headquarters of some League of Evil. I must have been tricked into coming here. She’s going to do me in!

“Hmm, now I get it,” the Director says. “You’re wearing the *Uden Vestitus* (*Dress of Nullification*).” She’d been quiet, thinking to herself after she’d observed the lightning hitting my new uniform. Even a few moments after it hit, I’d felt no pain at all, only the sensation of being *pushed* by something, but that had been all.

I slowly look down to check my skin to see if I have suffered any burns. There are no traces of the lightning anywhere on my body, and my uniform shows not even the slightest hint of wear. My uniform must be what the Director had said it was: the “**Uden Vestitus**.”



Uden Vestitus?

By “Dress of Nullification,” does she mean that my uniform can nullify magic? In that case, it meant that my clothes had “nullified”—blocked—the Director’s lightning.

I pat my new uniform all over to see if it feels different than normal clothes, but it doesn’t feel special at all. *I will admit that it is several degrees more comfortable than that dress I’d been wearing, however.*

The “Dress of Nullification.”

Just hearing that name makes it feel as if the clothes weigh a little more heavily on my body.

“Um, does that water sphere thing assess my abilities as a mage and then decide what to give me?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what it does.”

“Well then doesn’t that mean that maybe I don’t have any abilities?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Well, if I had a lot of ability, wouldn’t it *not* put out this uniform that completely protects me? Does it think I need this because I can’t protect myself?”

If this really is the “Dress of Nullification,” on the one hand it feels like too big of a gift for someone like me. Not only was it adorably cute, but it was also imbued with a powerful defense capability.

But on the other hand, wasn’t it possible that this “Gígnesthai Nero” had judged me to be some weak little mage, and that’s why it gave me this?

If I have to describe what I am feeling at this moment, I would have to say that I am more frustrated than I am pleased. I’m not *totally* conceited, but I will admit that I do have a degree of confidence in my magical abilities. I thought I’d become strong enough to beat any man in a test of magical skill—no, I thought I’d become strong enough to beat *anyone*—but here I am again, doubting myself.

I can't feel completely happy, being given something like this.

"That's not true at all," the Director says.

"Still—"

"You sometimes push yourself too hard, don't you?"

"Push myself too hard?"

"During that tournament during your fifth year, Ms. Hel, you saved your friends at the cost of burning your own skin, did you not? Not only that, but you saved almost *all* of the trapped girls. Why, the Knight Commander and I had quite the argument when we both stood to declare 'She's mine!' when we saw what you'd done.

"I rather like my memories of that day," she says, smiling.

"Your uniform was made based on your *personality* as well. The *Gígnesthai Nero* takes into account not only your magic type and skill, but also your personality when it creates your equipment. The reason you were given the Cudgel of the Goddess and the Dress of Nullification is that it judged those pieces of equipment to be the best for you. That's why I think the reason that it gave you the *Uden Vestitus* has less to do with the *amount* of power you wield as a mage, and more to do with the *way* you wield your power. It predicted that when you are faced with situations like that again, you'll likely jump into action and push yourself too far again."

"Push myself too far..."

"So it's not like it thinks you're some weak mage! Take pride in the power you wield." She patted the top of my head lightly. "Also: Do not speak of the *Gígnesthai Nero* to anyone not employed by the Guild."

"I can't tell anyone about it?"

"I told you that it will grant equipment to any whom I deem worthy, but the truth of the matter is that it's something that anyone could use if they knew the incantation. It's a form of magic that can create one-of-a-kind, legendary weapons, so it's quite valuable. We can't allow it to be used by any *unsavory* parties, so I've ordered all Harré employees to keep silent on the subject."

“Is—is that so?” I say. “I won’t say anything to anybody.” The Director smiles a bit at my flustered appearance and then sits down in her chair.

“Dare Rabdos is probably a bit awkward to carry around like that, so I’d suggest you use an incantation to shrink it and carry it around on your waist. I believe that’s the purpose of that belt.”

“‘Equipment suited to the mage,’ right?”

I use a shrinking spell on the cudgel and stick it through a loop on my belt. It fits in there perfectly, just like I’ve stuck a sword in its sheath.

“Now then, we’ve finally finished our preparations so that you can learn more about your job here at Harré. First, why don’t we get your luggage to your room? Like I said earlier, today we’ll just be showing you around and explaining different things about work here at Harré, but tomorrow’s the real deal. Prepare yourself, alright?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I pick up my luggage again and slip the carrying strap over my shoulder.

I wonder what he, Nikeh, and everyone else are doing right now.

Benjamine and Satanás had become sorcerers, so I might see them around Harré sometime.

Once I’ve settled in a bit here, I think I’ll send some letters off to Miss Maris, Nikeh, and the others.

* * * *

A four-legged table meant for food and conversation. Chairs around the table. A heavy iron door at the entrance. Papers stuck all over the notice board. Spinning ceiling fans made of black boards. A floor and walls made using a large amount of wood. The aroma and spice of grilled meat. The voices of sorcerers. The greetings and farewells of the employees.

“Um, Ms... Hel?”

“Yes, that’s me. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

This is where I am.

A man who's come to make his first request for a sorcerer is sitting across the table from me. He's holding a piece of paper, smiling at me.

"This is my first time making a request, so I hope you'll do me well."

It has been about two weeks since I started working at Harré.

Sitting at a reception desk meant for dealing with clients, I'm here learning from one of my senior colleagues about how to properly interact with clients. She's sitting right here next to me, and offers me help whenever it looks like I'm confused about what to do.

All of the employees that work reception are women, so of course she's a woman as well. Her name is Zozo Parasta. She's cute, with dark brown skin, and a little shorter than me. I already feel like she's my older sister. She's been working here for about five years, so she's twenty-three years old. She told me that she began working at Harré immediately after graduating from school.

"I need five klein flowers that grow in the mines. I'm a doctor, so I should be able to do this myself, but as you can see I'm missing a leg—lost it a long time ago. Even so, I was able to go there myself until recently, but it seems that a lot of people have been saying that demons are in all those mines now."

"So you want us to go and get the flowers?"

"Yes."

I look over several items written on the paper the man's brought. He's written quite a lot, ten dense lines of text, but basically he wants someone to go up to a certain mine and get these "klein flowers" for him.

I look away from the papers and back towards the man.

"If you'd just like the flowers, it might be a good idea to ask a skilled Earth-type sorcerer to take care of this for you."

"Earth, you say? I have asked one of my Earth-type acquaintances in the past to make one grow for me, but they told me they couldn't, so..."

"You can't make them grow unless you are well versed in the subject, but sorcerers are able to make magical plants sprout, grow, and blossom by using their own innate powers. They do study that sort of thing in school, after all."

There are of course differences, with different plants requiring different incantations, but in the text called the “**Book of Earth**,” I recall there being an incantation for klein flowers, so I believe that we’d be able to fulfill your request without having a sorcerer go into those mines. If we do that, we’ll be able to skip our preliminary survey of the assignment site, and the agency fee will be lower.”

“Is that so! Thank you very much.”

I quickly take out a request slip and have the happy man sign it. Perhaps because he’s so relieved, his signature extends to beyond the box marked for it, and he writes it quite quickly. I cast a spell to make a copy of the request slip, then take the copy over to the notice board and pin it up.

The man, who’d watched me go through the whole process from his seat at the counter, thanks me again before heading out the door.

“You’ve gotten rather used to this, haven’t you? You’re doing well.”

I’m taking a short breather after the man leaves, and that’s when Zozo flashes her brilliantly white teeth at me in a smile and “pats” me on the back so hard that I almost fall out of my seat from the force of the blow. Zozo’s “backpats” make me *grunt* every time she gives me one, but the other senior employees tell me they really are the “proof of her approval” for me and the work I’m doing, so I don’t mind them. Too much. *She’s cute anyway, so it’s all good.*

“It’s all thanks to you and the other receptionists who’ve taught me so well. Thank you so much.”

True, I have been sitting in the reception area for clients, but I can’t say that I’ve achieved my dream quite yet. What I really want to do is take care of the sorcerers who come in to receive their assignments, not continue sitting in the client area.

Those who are entitled to sit in those seats are the women who can do all the work done inside Harré. Zozo Parasta is, of course, one of the women entitled to sit in those seats. Over there, the receptionists have to manage all the information related to a request and the requestee, as well as verifying the contents of the work, which means fieldwork, and following that, negotiating the cost we charge for the job. But in the end, it’s only after you’d finally

managed to match the right sorcerer to the right job that you'd be considered a full employee here at Harré. Being able to sit in *those* seats means being able to take care of all that and more.

Even now, I know that I was right to admire that lady who'd been sitting here that time, all the way back when I was so young. She was completely worthy of my respect. I clasp my hands together, nodding to myself at the memory.

"We'll be switching out with the night shift here pretty soon. Let's mix things up a bit and go out for dinner tonight!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Haha, that's a good girl."

Zozo takes the request papers and places them on the desk's wooden shelves, then pulls out her coat from underneath the table. Shifts at Harré are split into daytime and nighttime, with the daytime shift starting in the morning and ending at dusk, while the nighttime shift starts at dusk and ends in the morning. I've only ever done the day shift. Zozo is responsible for me while I'm in my training period, so for the time being it seems like she won't be working the night shift. I'd apologized for messing with her schedule, but she'd told me that she "hated the night shift" and was "actually grateful" to have me around. I'm happy to have such a kind mentor taking care of me.

"I'm going to go grab my purse, okay?"

"Alright."

I still haven't completely gotten over my on-the-job nerves yet, so I can't just casually pack up and leave like Zozo is doing. I'm still technically "on the clock," so I continue sitting in the reception area to take care of anything that might need doing. *I think it'll be awhile before I feel that relaxed at work.*

"Ms. Hel, good evening."

"Good evening."

Just as I've gotten myself back into work mode, someone from the night shift taps me on the shoulder and bids good evening. It's a young woman wearing glasses, hair up in a ponytail, wearing a white cap as part of her uniform (or

should I say armor?). She sits down in the chair next to me.

“Go off and enjoy something to eat, alright?”

“Thank you, I will. Um, I’ll just leave you to it, then?”

“Understood.”

Zozo brought my coat as well. She waves to me as I stand up from the counter. Zozo’s uniform includes short pants, short boots, and a long-sleeved shirt. She’s the very image of a happy, cheerful girl. She doesn’t have anything like a hat or a cap on her head, so her beautiful, glossy black hair hangs freely down to her shoulders.

If only my hair hadn’t turned out like this... I pinch a bit of my hair and lift it up to look at. The color had been rather subtle. Even if it hadn’t been as pretty as Zozo’s hair, my hair *had* been a beautiful color before it turned into *this*... I’d thought about using magic to dye it dark brown, but I feel, in some weird way, that I’d be losing if I did that. How or to whom I’d be losing wasn’t clear, however. Anyway, I’d decided not to dye it.

“What’s up?” Zozo’s looking at me, puzzled at my silence.

“It’s nothing,” I say.

She’s come all the way back over to me and looks worried, likely because I have this dark look on my face as I stand there, silent.

Yikes, I’ve got to get a grip.

“What would you like to eat today?” I ask.

“I think I’d like to have a lotta vegetables rather than meat today,” she says.

“So would the Vegetarian Wolf be good then?”

“Let’s go!”

It’s also been two weeks since I’ve begun living in the employee dorms, and lately Zozo’s been going with me every time I go out to eat. *With all this eating out, I’m a bit worried that I’ll lose all those cooking skills I spent so much time learning.* Zozo herself didn’t seem like she cooked at all. “Making food for myself? It feels pointless to go to all that trouble for one person,” or so she’d

said when I'd asked her about it.

"I saw another lovey-dovey couple at Harré today," she growls, spitting on the floor without caring about the shocked glances her behavior draws. *Zozo is pretty cute, but she can be a bit... coarse, at times.*

"Coarse" is perhaps not the right word, but it's close to describing her personality, although I'd *never* say that to her face. *I must admit it is refreshing to have someone like her around, someone so open with her feelings.*

We went to the Vegetarian Wolf restaurant, had dinner, and aimlessly wandered about the town a bit before I decided to head home to my dorm room. I still hadn't gotten my first paycheck, so going to another store was out of the question.

The size of the dorm rooms can basically be described like this: if you had a bed made for one person, took eight of them, and put them in the room, there would still be space left over, so they are actually rather spacious. *Certainly larger than my room at home had been.*

The rent is taken out of my paycheck, but the room itself had come furnished with everything from kitchen appliances to a bed, so I think I've actually gotten a good deal to live in such luxury like this. The room also has an attached bathroom, with a small tub that I have all to myself. I'm quite glad to have a place to soak in and enjoy some nice hot water. For those times when I want to stretch out and enjoy a more spacious bath, the only option I have is heading to the public bathing house, but that's better than nothing.

"Oh, I am full," I say to myself, patting my belly.

Without bothering to change into my loungewear, I lay down on my bed and bury my face in my soft pillow. I rub my face around and around the pillow until it becomes difficult to breathe, then flip over onto my back, looking at the ceiling.

So what did I do today? I checked the contents of the requests the clients had made, and posted them up on the notice board. Check and post, check and post. Again and again.

This part of a receptionist's job is mostly done by first-year newbies, and as the only newbie this year, it seems like there is no way I'm going to be doing anything other than this for at least until the end of my first year. My days will be filled with those tasks and with watching the more senior employees get to head out into the field, conduct consultations with sorcerers, or match them with appropriate assignments, all the while sitting on my own little, warm chair (always warm because I am always sitting on it).

That said, it doesn't change the fact that what I am doing is important, and while it's easy enough for a total newcomer to be able to do, there's no mistaking the fact that it's an important task. After all, if no one does it, no one will be able to give those assignments to sorcerers in the first place.

"That's right," I say to myself, reaching over to grab something off my desk. I open up a drawer with a small knob on it. I rustle around with my hand in the drawer, looking for something, and I quickly find what I want. I'd been searching for a letter that was inside a thin sky-blue envelope.

I lay back down and hold the letter out in front of me.

This letter is one that Benjamine had sent me. The dorm mother who'd handed me the letter had said something like "*Oooh, I'll need to keep my eyes on you*" when she saw Benjamine's name on the envelope, mistaking it for a boy's name and believing her to be my lover.

"I'm afraid you're quite mistaken," I'd politely corrected her, "even other maidens call me 'the little maiden.'" But she'd just taken my remark to have been made out of shyness, and we still haven't cleared up the issue.

All of my and the other dorm residents' deliveries are sent to the dorm mother's room. The mail carriers also bring her our letters, and everything that arrives is handed to us directly by the dorm mother. "Safe and sound," as she would say. It is possible for the sender to use a spell to have something sent directly to the addressee, but using that method, it is likely for the package or letter to get caught in a tree or taken out by the rain, so the surefire way to get something sent is to have a courier deliver it for you. Magic is convenient, but for things like this, a human being is more reliable.

"A letter from Benjamine," I say to myself.

I still haven't read it. I open up the envelope and spread out the pages.

"I need to start sending letters too."

I'd kept thinking about sending letters to everyone, but before I could actually get myself to do so, a letter from Benjamine had arrived. *It's a good opportunity for me to both write her a response and send letters to everyone else.*

On paper made from pressed flowers, in tiny, neat print, I read what Benjamine has written to me.

Dear Nanalie,

Geez, have you forgotten all about me? It's been three weeks since we graduated, but you still haven't sent me a single letter. It's been quite exasperating... Just kidding. Joking with you, girl. I'm the exasperating one, writing this letter to you just three weeks after we graduated, right? I sent letters to Nikeh and Satanás as well, but I find myself worrying so much about all of you sometimes I can't even breathe! After all, we were together all those years, and now we're apart. It's too lonely, don't you think? Maybe we should go back for another six years? I'm surprised that I'm missing you all this much, you know. Maybe once I find love, I'll be all clingy. Ugh, that's too scary to think about. Oh, that's right, would you believe this? I made this promise to Satanás before we graduated, because after all, he's going to be a sorcerer like me, right? Anyway, I told him I felt sad about not being able to see anyone anymore after graduation, when all of a sudden he comes out with, "Well, in that case, why don't we work together?" Goodness gracious, me oh my, I raised both hands to the heavens and said "yes!" These things don't happen too often after all, right? Not at all! Satanás can be pretty hard to figure out sometimes, so if I hadn't responded instantly I would have never gotten a hold of him again. We made promises to each other way before that graduation party dance, after all, so that I could have him to myself. He is, of course, excited about the whole thing. On the inside. That's what I learned, more than anything else, during my six years there, how he's feeling on the inside. But after that, he hasn't been in touch with me at all. I thought I'd give in and send letters to you and the other girls all at the same time to ask your opinions about this whole situation, but—what do you think? Do you think things will be alright between Satanás and me?

“...”

In answer to my dear friend’s letter, the first I’ve received in a long time, I write:

“It’ll probably be alright, won’t it?”

And that was my reply.

* * * *

It’s been three months since I came to Harré. I still sit in the same place. What I actually do on the job has also remained the same. I am smoothly and successfully taking care of all the work assigned to me, sitting in my assigned seat.

I haven’t made any spectacular mistakes in my work thus far. If I had to give an example of something I’ve screwed up, it’d have to be that time when I misspelled someone’s name. It happened just the other day, in fact. I made a mistake writing a client’s name on a job request form—I’d never seen nor heard the name “Doraminiamus Vestra Vi Salubaadagan”—and I’d ruined the entire form and had to use a new one. Even though I’d checked the spelling twice and had the client write his own name on a different piece of paper, I’d messed up the spelling on the actual form. I can’t forget the client’s bitter expression when he saw my mistake. *I’ll never be able to forget that look on his face.*

It’d been quite rude of me to make that mistake. I had decided to study the spelling conventions of names from across the world so it would never happen again.

But beyond that particular incident, there hasn’t been much else of note. Lately, there haven’t even been any requests that could genuinely be called “dangerous.” (For that matter, I’ve never actually had any client of mine make a request that I would consider “dangerous.”) The assignment board is filled with requests like:

“My dear lynx has run away. Would someone please find it for me?”

“My only daughter keeps saying she wants to go traveling by herself. Could someone secretly tail her and guard her from any dangers along the road? No limit on pay. Just stick with her until she gets bored and comes home.”

“I’m in some deep trouble with these monstrous bugs that have shown up near my house.”

“On the other side of a nearby mountain—”

Most of the requests are for things like finding a lost child or guarding the daughter of some VIP—odd jobs, really. But from what I understand, there are “seasons” when those types of requests come in more often, and right now we are in the Peaceful Season. While no one has said to me that this is merely the “calm before the storm,” they have warned me that after a period of time when we got requests like these, there would be another wave of tough requests that would come flying in. That’s why right now, before that happens, is the absolute best time for a newcomer like me to get used to the whole situation.

Of all the recent requests, there had been two related to trouble with demons. Those two requests had been for exorcism of demons, and with excellent pay at that, so they’d caught the eyes of the sorcerers and been taken care of in just a couple of days.

Among the sorcerers, there are many who seemed to be rather bloodthirsty. They are all just itching to do anything related to exorcisms. *It’s a little vulgar to see how they react when a new request for demon exorcism comes in, but I suppose I can understand their excitement. It’s how they make their living, after all.*

“The sign of the sun, and then a reverse sign of the sea,” I say to myself.

Anyhow, getting back to the present.

“Draw a circle... and then another ancient character?”

I’m sitting on my bed, holding the book I’m reading in my left hand while drawing magic circles with my right. Just as my stomach feels like it’s about to rumble, I glance over at the clock and see that it’s already noon.

“Oh! I almost forgot. I need to eat lunch.”

I push my bangs back behind my ears. I set aside my pen and pull up my hair back into a tighter ponytail, then head over to the kitchen table to make lunch.

“Vegetables? Meat? Hmm...”

This whole month, on my days off, I've been using the *Dare Labdos (Cudgel of the Goddess)* that I received from the Director on my first day and making it absorb many different kinds of magic circles. I haven't had as many chances to use magic in my work as I'd thought, so this trial-and-error magic circle work doubles as a sort of strength training regimen to keep my skills sharp. Plus, once I've had the Cudgel of the Goddess absorb a magic circle, I can use the relevant spell as many times as I want after that. For now, my goal is to make it absorb at least one hundred magic circles.

Every time I want *Dare Labdos* to absorb a circle, I place its tip at the center, and it's actually a fascinating process to watch. The lines of the circle rustle as the stick pulls them in, looking almost as if the stick is unweaving a spider's web one thread at a time.

I still have to draw those circles by hand, however, so it's kind of a pain. Last weekend, I drew five circles with complicated designs that I had seen in "*Ancient Signs and Seals*," a text on magic circles that I'd gotten from my mom. I can draw around twenty magic circles in a day if their structures are simple, but even someone of my ability needs a full *half-day* to draw just *one* of the complicated old magic circles, what with their ancient characters and weird designs and all. But the effects of those five circles merit their difficulty:

Twist Space-time (*I can go to any place or time I wish to in the past.*)

Teleportation (*I can go anywhere I want, no matter the distance from my current location.*)

Complete Cure (*A healing spell which only works on those who are on the brink of death.*)

Invocation of the Dead (*I can speak with any deceased person, just once.*)

Spell for a Speaker (*Effective against those who refuse to talk. A.K.A. the Truth Spell.*)

All those spells had effects that were quite difficult to replicate using incantation magic. I had spent over two days drawing those magic circles in order to have the *Dare Labdos* absorb them for future use.

I had been drawing all of the magic circles in the book in order, just as a test

of my own abilities. I had no idea if they would be of much help when I actually tried using them, but since I was getting better at drawing magic circles by going through the book, I didn't mind if they didn't actually work. Today, however, I had gone through the book more carefully, picked out some interesting ones, and drawn those, just to change things up.

"Vegetables, and... vegetables. Is that all I have?"

I'm trying to figure out something to cook, but when I look into my pantry, all I see are vegetables.

Well, I guess I did use the last of the bunny-bird yesterday for dinner. That was the last of my meat! It's a bit late to be realizing this just now... I not only have no rice or bread, I also have no meat, which means I have to go shopping. *I really wish there was a spell that would make some meat for me right now. It's rather unfortunate that no such spell exists.*

While there were, of course, spells that could materialize fire or ice out of thin air, there were no spells that could create neatly cut and sliced animal meat from nothing. *Even if there were such a spell, it'd be amazingly complicated.* It was possible to use spells to discreetly have some meat *magically* appear on your plate, fresh from your local butcher, but most stores had anti-theft charms placed on them, so in reality that wasn't an option either.

Time to head on over to the market. It's a bit far from my dorm, so I decide to summon Lala for the trip. I change out of my thin loungewear and put on what I normally wear when I have to go out.

"Summon Magical Beast: *Karomagia Zohon.*"

She appears with a familiar *fwump*.

"Master," she says, greeting me.

"Not 'Master.' 'Nanalie.'"

A white wolf is bowing its head before me. I kneel down before it, meet its gaze with my own eyes, and try to have it call me by my name. She lets out a small whine at my persistence.

"Lady... Nanalie."

“Just ‘Nanalie.’”

“...My lady Nanalie.”

Lala’s been calling me “Master” ever since I first made her my familiar, but I wanted to change that after arriving at Harré, so I’ve been trying to have her call me by name. It feels rather distant of her to insist on calling me “Master” all the time. To Lala, it seems like I am trying to push her to do something she’d really rather not. Even so, I’ll keep trying until she finally gives in.

Lala calls me “Master” because of some habit she had back when she was part of a lynx pack. She’d apparently called the leader of the pack “my lord.” And so since I rank above her in her mind, she told me the very first time I summoned her that she would “insist” on calling me “Master.” Back then I hadn’t really minded, but everyone else’s familiar was so, well, *familiar* with the way they referred to their summoners, calling them by their first names. I’d heard that friendly back-and-forth between mage and familiar several times and thought, “*Huh? What’s different about my situation?*” When I’d asked Nikeh, Benjamine, and Miss Maris about it, they’d said, respectively:

“Oh, it’s just a difference of personality.”

“Wow, I’m so jealous! My familiar started calling me by my first name without even asking...”

“I *force* my familiar to refer to me as ‘Goddess,’ you know.”

Well, besides that last example from Maris, everyone else had told me how nice it must be to be referred to as “Master.” It made me realize how very different my worldview was from my noble classmates.

We step out of the room and I say, “Lala, let’s go shopping over at the market.”

“And what might we be buying today?”

“Meat. I only have vegetables right now. After that, maybe we can go for a walk.”

“Have you already completed your work with the absorption of the magic circles?”

“Mmmm... Well no, but with you here I kinda feel like going for a walk anyway.”

“Perhaps it would be a good idea to take a break.”

“Yeah! Let’s go.”

Perhaps it won’t make my growling stomach feel very happy, but today I’m going to just have a light meal for lunch while we’re on our walk. It doesn’t change the fact that my goal is to buy some meat, but once I saw Lala my mood had changed.

It’s a holiday, after all. Rather than working on magic circles, I ought to work on Lala’s and my relationship.

As I’m walking down the dorm hallway with Lala following closely behind, I bump into Zozo. She’s carrying a shoulder bag and wearing a hat.

“What’s this? Going out?”

“You too, Miss Zozo?”

“Yeah. I’m going to meet a friend from a neighboring kingdom.”

Zozo has almost exactly the same days off of work that I do, so we’re nearly always on the same schedule. I’m the one shadowing her for work, so the Director has arranged for us to normally be on duty together.

Still, heading off to a “neighboring kingdom”? That’s a little worrying, isn’t it?

“It looks like we’re going to have good weather today, so it’s the perfect chance to go have some fun!” she says.

“That’s right! But still, be careful, okay? I hear that the woods at Doran’s borders can be rather dangerous, and the Order has had to increase their patrols there recently.”

“Relax, we’re not weak enough to be concerned about *that*, right?”

“S...sure.”

She gives me a bright and confident grin. I can only offer a halfhearted smile in return.

While we may not have received any dangerous requests recently, that

doesn't mean the demons have disappeared from the forest. There haven't been any victims yet, but reports of demon sightings near the forest have been growing more numerous, and I've been told that the King has ordered the Knights to survey the area to find the cause of the increase in sightings.

Nikeh is one of the knights in the Order, so I'm a bit worried about that. *I hope she's not being forced to do anything risky.* Also, while women are allowed into the Order nowadays, it's still mostly made up of men. *That's worrisome in a whole different sense. What's she gonna do if some creepy guy latches onto her?*

"Well then, let's both enjoy our day off."

"Yes! See you later," says Zozo, dashing away down the hallway. *She certainly has quite a lot of energy,* I think, impressed. I begin making my way to the dorm entrance as well.

Far off, I can hear the dorm mother yelling "YOU AIN'T RUNNING IN HERE, GIRL!" *I'm still up here on the third floor and I can hear that.*

The dorm mother's room is on the first floor, so she'd probably seen Zozo dashing by and felt a flash of rage that compelled her to raise her voice.

It seems that everyone has a lot of energy today.

I arrive at the market, all the food stalls bustling with the lunchtime crowd. I get off of Lala's back and set my feet on the ground—but the moment I do so, I realize just how much hotter the air is here near the ground as opposed to up in the sky. My body itself feels like it's radiating much more heat than normal.

With *Curio Anemos* (Cool Breeze), I make the air around my body cooler.

"Lala, your paw," I say, holding out my hand.

"Thank you," she says as I shrink her down small enough to fit in the palm of my hand, then place her on my shoulder. As a Blanc Lykos, who'd spent her whole life living in a cold climate, she wasn't good with heat. If she crystallized then it wouldn't bother her at all, but according to her, "crystallization makes it difficult to move around." So as long as we didn't need that defensive capability in a fight, she wasn't going to crystallize.

“Lala.”

“Yes?”

I check on Lala as she rides on my shoulder. She’s adorable as she sits there wagging her tail back and forth. Without thinking, I rub my face against hers. “Gahh you’re so cute! Don’t fall down, okay?”

“Yes.”

The market is rather lively today. Watching the hustle and bustle of the crowds is kinda fun. I smell something... It smells heavenly... Oops, gotta watch the drooling in public. Don’t want to get my clothes all dirty and look like a mess. That’s right, just keep my mouth shut, no drooling, no mess.

“How would you like some freshly picked, sweet Portokali oranges?”

A crowd of people surrounds a fruit stall. The lady who owns the stall is offering samples to passersby, and she seems to be doing well. *Oranges sound good, but perhaps there’s a more filling, cheaper meal nearby here somewhere...* I sniff the air, searching. Payday is tomorrow, so today I need to refrain from going overboard. *If I taste one of her samples, I am definitely going to buy one of her fruits. Stay focused.* I suck in my cheeks, biting the insides to distract myself.

It’s not like I don’t have any money, but I am trying to save half of my salary, so I have to resist the temptation.

I reach down to grab the small purse attached to my belt. I hear a small *clink* as the coins inside slip against each other. *If I spend three pegalo on meat for one meal, I’ll have two pegalo left.* Twenty pegalo is the average amount it costs to feed one person for a day, but with two pegalo, the only thing I can buy is a small side dish or a light snack to eat while walking around the market.

If someone were to ask me right now, “Excuse me Miss, are you poor?” I would reply, with confidence: “Oh yes, I am unmistakably poor.” Perhaps that isn’t something one should say with “confidence,” but if I maintained that way of thinking instead of going about believing myself to be a rich person, I’d save a lot more money in the end.

What, exactly, I am saving this money up for isn’t something I’ve decided yet,

however. It's fun to think about what I'll buy though, from time to time.

"Hmm. Maybe I need to come up with a magic circle that'll materialize meat."

"Is that possible?"

"Nah, I can't do that. But I wish I could. Still, even if I could make one up, I'd only use it on the down-low. If I went out and told everyone about it, the butchers in the marketplace would be out of business, right?"

"I suppose that is true."

The fragrant aroma of the meat sears its way into my nostrils every time I so much as take a step forward. *This smells amazing—I can't hold myself back for much longer.* I hold one hand up to cover my nose so I can't smell anymore, as if in self-defense. "Master," Lala whispers in my ear, *"is that really necessary...?"* She looks at me, eyes filled with pity.

Stop it. Don't look at me like that.

"Haha, ron'd sall be wasker, sall be hahahie," I mumbled through my hand. (Translation: Lala, don't call me "Master," call me "Nanalie.")

"Y-yes, Lady Nanalie."

"Ms. Hel! So good to see you again."

As Lala and I are talking, someone calls out to me from the other side of the street.

Hm? I stop walking and look around. *I feel like someone just said my name...?* "Hel" isn't a common name; I've never heard of anyone else besides my mother and father who had it.

"I guess I imagined it."

"Ms. Hel!"

"Gah!"

The instant I'm about to start walking again, someone taps my unoccupied shoulder, the one without Lala. I jump, startled at the sudden touch.

Whew, that was dangerous. I felt like my heart was going to leap out of my chest there for a moment.

“Don’t you recognize me? I’m the doctor.”

“That’s right! Doctor Petros!”

When I turn around, wondering who in the world could be trying to talk to me, it turns out to be Doctor Petros, the client who had come to Harré to make a request for klein flowers the other day.

“With that beautiful blue hair, I instantly knew it was you, Ms. Hel. I apologize for startling you.”

“Not at all.”

I rub the back of my neck with one hand, bashful as I give him a slight bow. I wave away his apology, grimacing on the inside.

Dammit. I really stand out with this hair, don’t I?

I pinch my bangs a little in frustration.

“With the help of the klein flowers, I was able to make the medicine without any trouble at all. I am grateful to the Earth sorcerer who took on the job. There are certain injuries and diseases that not even magic can heal. It’s quite difficult to make the medicines necessary for those situations.”

“The only antidotes for poisons from magical plants are those made that special way, right?”

The Doctor’s false leg extends down from just below his knee. He’d told me he lost it a long time ago. Petros knew better than most about the kinds of injuries that not even healing magic could heal.

“Yes, that’s right. So I’ll be continuing in my work to produce more of those antidotes,” he says, smiling and raising a fist in the air.

“Yo, Petros! Well well, look who you’ve got here. Pretty little lady, isn’t she?”

“Hey, Marco.”

“This is the little lady from Harré you told me about last time, right?”

A large man wearing a cloth covering over his head comes up from behind Petros and slings one arm around his shoulder, looking over at me.

“Excuse me?” I say.

Ugh. I've been cornered by some hoodlum, it seems. I recoil a bit at the sight of this random man complimenting my appearance, but from what I can understand of their conversation, it seems like he's an acquaintance of Petros's. His eyes are positively gleaming with admiration as he looks at me.

"The little lady from Harré." That could only be referring to me, right?

I look back at Petros, blushing as I nod my head at this newcomer.

"After I came into Harré to make my request, I crossed paths with one of my patients. We spoke of you a bit on our way home together," Petros says. "He's a friend."

"Petros really took good care of me. I couldn't have made a klein flower grow myself. Seems like you also managed to push down the request fee, so thanks for that."

"Oh, not at all. It is all thanks to the sorcerers. The Earth ones, especially."

"You got that right!" Marco lets out a hearty laugh. His smile brings out the wrinkles on his face, making it look rather lovable. *Even a hoodlum has his charm.*

He's wearing a tight, sleeveless shirt and loose-fitting pants. He looks quite strong, with the definition of the muscles on his chest creating a visible outline on his shirt. *I suppose when people use the word "brawny," they're thinking of someone like this guy.*

"Harré and the sorcerers there have taken care of so much, you know?"

It seems like another of Petros's acquaintances has decided to join our conversation. An old lady carrying a shopping bag totters up next to him, smiling. *They must know Petros because he's a doctor.*

"Praise be for both Harré and the Royal Order of Knights," she says.

Then an old man who looks like he's from the neighborhood, possibly a friend or acquaintance of the old lady, walks up to me from behind her and asks me for a handshake. I shake his hand, wondering, *Who on earth is this guy?*

There are no distinctions of class or profession or anything else when you're at the market. *I suppose that's a good thing.*

“There’s nothing that the knights and those sorcerers over at Harré can’t take care of.”

“The knights go around doing their investigations of the mischief done by those darn demons, and they protect us from other invading countries at the same time. Meanwhile, the sorcerers take the time to help us out, the little people, with our own private problems. They’re such a big help when it comes time to get rid of some demons.”

At some point, everyone around me had suddenly joined in on our conversation, with the topic of sorcerers and knights spreading out from our little group like a wave. *The lively clamor of the market just got livelier.*

“Well lookee here, speak and they shall appear! There’s some knights up in the sky,” Marco says, pointing up above the market. Everyone else looks up to where he is pointing.

Far above, I can see some knights dressed in their black uniforms, riding pegasi, their winged horses, in formation. Those holy horses have pure white wings that flash in the brilliance of the sunlight.

All of the people in the marketplace wave up at them. “Hey—!” they shout.

It’s almost as if they’re the most popular people in the kingdom... No, not “almost as if.” They truly are the most adored people in the entire kingdom.

The black uniforms of the knights create a sharp contrast with the white of the pegasi. It sets my mind at ease, seeing them up there.

While I’m standing there squinting up at the knights, I catch sight of a familiar face flying in the formation. It’s a young woman, her pretty blond hair fluttering behind her in the wind.

“Nikeh!” I yell up at my friend. I’m worried about what I’m going to do if it isn’t actually Nikeh up there, but it’s a little late to be thinking about that now, after I’ve already shouted. *If I’m wrong, and it turns out she’s a total stranger, I’ll run away to the other side of the marketplace. Who knows if she actually heard me, anyway?*

But right after I shout, the group halts in midair. One of the pegasi separates from the others and dives down towards the market. Its rider is the same

person I'd called out to earlier—and it looks like I'd been right. It *is* Nikeh.

"Nanalie!" She waves to me from atop her horse.

"Nikeh! Good to see you."

I run over to where she is dismounting from her horse. It's still in the market area, but there are no stalls here at this end of the road. It seemed like she had chosen this spot to land because it's a great deal less crowded than where I had been standing just a few moments ago.

The wings on her horse carry her to her destination faster than I can run to meet her. Once her horse's hooves are on the ground, she takes a deep breath before stepping down from her saddle.

"I've missed you so much!"

She gives the pegasus she'd been riding a quick *pat* on the head, then comes running over to me, arms spread wide. I dive right into her embrace and give her a tight hug. Her uniform is rough to the touch, so it's not that comfortable, but I'm so happy to see her again that I pay it no mind.

"Your hair color kinda stands out, so I was able to see it from even up in the sky! I knew it was you, instantly."

"Re-really?"

My hair suddenly feels heavy, weighing down the excitement I'd felt upon meeting Nikeh. It is a dark, close, claustrophobic curtain, one that I am certain I will never be rid of. For my hair to have marked me out in a crowd *again* makes me want to grind my teeth in frustration, but Nikeh seems happy to have found me so easily, so I let it slide.

"Anyway, sorry about that," I say, "shouting your name up at you while you're working."

"Don't worry about it. We're just out on a routine patrol, so it's not like we're actually in any rush to get somewhere."

"Is that so?"

I'm not the right one to be asking this question, having called her down out of the sky and all, but was it really alright for her to just leave her unit so easily to

come down and meet with me? “Are you sure you don’t need to go back up now?” I ask.

“Yeah, it’s all good, Nanalie.” She sounds confident enough that I decide not to pursue the subject further. We release each other from our embrace and take a step back to get a good look at one another.

“Besides, the company that I’m in, it’s full of all these people that are so much stronger than me that it’s a little depressing.”

“Stronger?”

She points her finger up at the sky. I look up and concentrate my gaze on the knights maintaining formation up there. All of them are wearing the same knightly uniforms, so they all look strong to me. *They probably are all strong. Nikeh herself just told me so, after all.*

At the head of the formation is a man significantly larger than the rest. *Is that...?* It’s the Knight Commander. The man that the Director always talks about with such a hard, fierce look in her eyes. “Next time you run into Beardface,” she’d told me, “throw some salt over your shoulder as you pass him by. It’ll keep away the evil spirits that follow him around.” With him right above me, however, I have neither the courage nor the salt to do such a thing, so I block the Director’s words from my mind. *Sorry, Director. I had no salt on me.*

But there, behind the Knight Commander, was a young man with black hair...

Could that be...?

“Wait, is that Prince Zenon?”

“Yeah. We’re in the same unit.”

Well, this is a surprise. *To think that the Prince and Nikeh are in the same unit!* She hadn’t written a single thing about *that* in her letters, so I’m rather shocked. *I am her friend, but he is the Prince, so perhaps she had wanted to avoid mentioning it to me.*

He isn’t wearing his usual military outfit, so at first glance I don’t recognize him. He’s dressed in the knight’s uniform, just like the others, but something about that princely aura of nobility he gives off definitively marks him as

different from the rest.

The Prince, from atop his pegasus above me, lifts a hand in greeting. I wave back, and Prince Zenon's horse bows its head. *I find it a bit strange that such a regal and proud horse should bend its neck to one like me, but perhaps the horse bows its head because its master cannot.* That particular horse he's riding has one horn coming out from its forehead, like a unicorn. *Perhaps it's a different species.*

I casually ask Nikeh about it, and it seems that it's the only one of its kind, born from a pegasus and a unicorn. *I get it, it's half and half, then.*

Most of the knights ride pegasi, not their familiars, when they're on duty. From what I know about other kingdoms, it seems like most of their knights use familiars to get around, but the Knights of Doran are quite proud to have the pegasus as a symbol of the kingdom and its strength.

Still, to think that Nikeh is a member of this unit. In the same one as both the Knight Commander and Prince Zenon. She's done quite well for herself.

I wonder where...?

"He's not up there, is he?"

"Nanalie? Who are you talking about?"

Huh, he's not. I thought for sure he'd be in this unit too.

He'd always been with the Prince back at school, so I figured they'd be put into the same unit in the Knights as well. I'm not disappointed, but I feel something akin to disappointment.

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Rockmann's the captain of another unit, you know."

"No, I don't... What?"

"No, I don't really care about him," is what I'd meant to say, but can I believe my ears? What on earth has she just said?

Nikeh's giving me an awkward look for some reason. Wait, it's because my mouth has been hanging wide open for the past several seconds.

“There was an opening for captain of the smallest unit,” she says. “Rockmann was selected to fill that role.”

I am totally unable to close my mouth. Nikeh’s voice seems to be coming from farther and farther away.

“Caap-taan?”

Here I am, quietly and carefully taking care of my basic tasks as a newcomer at Harré, day in, day out.

And there *he* is, just three months after graduation, having become the *captain of a unit of knights. What’s this world coming to? Sure, he’s skilled as a mage, and he’s not stupid. He’s actually rather intelligent. He got better grades than I did (unfortunately).*

The difference between his situation and my own is as great as the divide between heaven and earth.

Up there flies Rockmann, a Knight of the Royal Order, dashing across the sky on his winged horse. Down here I crawl around on the earth, on hands and knees, watching him from far, far below.

“Isn’t it way too early for him to be a captain?!”

To be “fast-tracked” in your career—that must mean doing what Rockmann had done.

“Maybe, but he’s very talented, and he comes from a good family. He’s already been placed into the role, and it’s all under the Commander’s orders, so there’s no going back now.”

Nikeh looks up at the sky and lets out a small sigh. I look up as well and realize that I can see something that appears to be a different unit of pegasi-mounted knights heading this way.

“Prince Zenon will, one day, be appointed Vice Commander. It’s not like Rockmann’s ever being appointed to the top job as Commander of the Order, so it’s really nothing to worry about, you know.”

“I’m not—anyway, I’m not sure how I feel about the whole thing. It’s strange.”

“What about it?”

I’d been shocked when I first heard that he’d been appointed captain, but now that I think about it some more, I’m not exactly sure how I feel about this. For Nikeh to go and say that Rockmann would never be “appointed to the top job...” Something about those words doesn’t sit right with me. We had competed for the top spot all those years in school (or rather, I had attempted to compete with him for it), so to hear her say that made me feel... confused, I guess. *I’m not sure how I feel, but whatever it is, it’s not simple.*

“Looks like the units have met up, so I’ll be heading back up now.”

“Met up?”

“We were waiting on another unit. That’s why the Commander allowed me to come down here and talk to you for a while.”

“Oh, was that why?”

“I’ll be sure to write you another letter. We don’t often get a chance to see each other, but if we both manage to get the same day off, let’s go have fun somewhere. Invite Benjamine and Maris as well.”

“Yeah. I’ll write to you too. Catch you later.”

“Bye, Nanalie. Love you!”

We wave at each other, and then Nikeh takes off to head back up into the sky, while I go back to buying meat. Petros had seen us talking, and came up to ask me if I had a friend in the Order. The entire market had been chattering about Nikeh and me the whole time, apparently.

Well, I was able to go out to buy some meat, walk around with Lala, and meet up with a friend. All in all, a fulfilling day off.

Working at Harré, Part Two

It's been half a year since I began working at Harré.

"Here is the request form."

I hold a piece of paper in one hand, smiling.

The weather outside is perfect, work is going smoothly, and there are a lot of sorcerers and clients coming into Harré today. I think a lot of them come in just for lunch, and due to the rush, it smells like the kitchen is busier than usual. I can smell the mouthwatering flavors of meat and spices from my seat all the way over here at reception.

That smells like it would be great right about now. It's just about time for me to have lunch, right?

I place one hand on my stomach, trying to prevent it from growling too loudly.

"Alright then, I hope my request gets taken care of soon."

"Yes, of course. Thank you for your patronage."

The client in front of me places their seal on the request forms. I hold my hand out over the papers and duplicate them instantly. *And so one becomes two.* I'm completely used to this sort of work by now.

Just as I'm looking over at some male sorcerer tearing into the meat before him with vigor, I process yet another client. I'm dealing with everything from checking the contents of the request—easy or difficult, negotiating on price, and then double checking everything. It's all making me rather hungry.

It's already lunchtime and I still can't take a break...

"Hey now, aren't there any better jobs than this kinda crap?!"

"At the present moment, this is the only level of work we can assign you."

"Hah?! What're you trying to get at?"

Still, I'm sitting on the easier side of this whole process. Those receptionists

dealing with the sorcerers over there look like they've got it rough.

Ms. Harris, my bespectacled senior colleague, is somehow managing to deal with a group of aggressively arrogant sorcerers with a polite, kind smile on her face. I'm not going to go over there and tell those sorcerers that they're overconfident, but I *would* like to tell the guys who take us receptionists lightly because we're women that they need to give it up. Especially with Ms. Harris. She seems rather calm and frail at first, but she wavers not in the slightest once she's made a decision about something.

At times like these, her glasses will flash in that peculiar way, and suddenly her foe looks not onto the cute little face of a receptionist, but into the very heart of hell.

"I don't think the job suits me at all, you know."

"But this request—"

"You know, I like this one better."

In the next line over from Ms. Harris's reception desk, a different colleague of mine is dealing with another sorcerer. *That* sorcerer is complaining about how the jobs he's being given don't suit him, he wants different work, doesn't want *that* job, and on and on, whining about every little thing she does as she tries to show him different request forms. *He's getting nowhere at all.* All of the receptionists have smiles on their faces, but on the inside I know that their blood is *definitely* boiling.

I mentioned earlier that most of the receptionists were women, but the fact of the matter is that most of the employees here at Harré are women. There are, of course, some male employees, but the vast majority of them are usually out doing fieldwork, so most of the employees inside the building at any given moment are women. The employee gender ratio is about four women for every man. There are a lot of young women among the employees, but it's more common for the men to be in their forties or fifties.

It seemed like the reason for that imbalance was that most of the young men coming of age every year joined the Knight's Order. Most of them hoped to become knights after they graduated because they believed it was an honorable profession, the commoners loved the knights, and it had a certain

cultural cachet to say you were a knight.

“Nanalie!” the Director had told me recently, “You don’t need salt next time you come across the Knight Commander, just grab some big bugs and fling them at him!”

“Understood. I’ll be sure to carry some around with me.”

So that’s the reason why there were only a few men working at Harré. The Knight Commander and the Director didn’t have a good relationship for several reasons, but the lack of male recruits seemed to be at least one of the reasons for the Director’s antipathy towards him.

If I had to describe the work done at Harré, I’d say it’s like working backstage. Our jobs aren’t as flashy as those of the knights, but a lot of people who were formerly a part of the Royal Order, those who’d gotten older and less able to perform the work required of a knight, often chose to come work at Harré as a place to start over. If they’d lost their skills as a mage, however, the Director wouldn’t even think about hiring them, of course.

It was the man who guided me around Harré when I first arrived who told me all this. He’d left the Order at the age of thirty, and said that he’d been working here ever since then, for about ten years. I heard him speak just that once about his time as a Knight—to protect the secrecy of the Order, he’d been forced to swear a “Blood Oath” to keep the contents of his work secret. The Oath was a magical spell that kept him from saying anything about most of what he’d done on the job as a knight.

It’s certainly not a spell that I can lift.

“Um, what sort of request might you wish to make?”

“Hello!”

“Hello.”

While my mind is distracted by those other thoughts, I continue taking care of anything that comes my way.

“And how old might you be?”

“Two!”

“Two years old? That’s quite something.”

“Ye-AH!”

“Oh, sorry about that.”

Before me sits a very cute little girl and her mother. The little girl’s light golden hair is carefully gathered into two ponytails. She’s sitting on her mother’s knees, beaming as she looks at the pure white request form. She looks transfixed, as if it were the most interesting object in the world.

I see her looking that way and am taken back to when I was that young. *When I first came here with my father, did I look like that as well?*

It’s embarrassing to think about. I feel a bit uneasy about that possibility.

“Ah,” the mother sighs. She, on the other hand, does not look very happy. She’s gently petting the top of her girl’s head, letting out a sigh every so often.

She seems troubled by something.

“Are you alright?” I ask. Perhaps it’s rude, but I go on to say, “You don’t seem to be feeling very well.”

“Well, it’s just...” Her reply trails off.

What do I do now? I’ve really screwed up now, haven’t I? I break out into a cold sweat.

We’ve been stuck here like this for a while. Every time I try to ask her about what, exactly, she wants to make her request about, she just sighs. The little girl will talk to me, but the mother, who I *really need* to tell me something, refuses to say a word.

I feel like I’m being tested here. Do I have what it takes to be a good employee at Harré?

“...My husband, he... he hasn’t come home since yesterday.”

Just about when I myself am feeling a bit ill as well, she suddenly lifts her head and looks straight at me.

“Your husband?”

So that’s what this is about. An infidelity investigation.

I get a little excited at the new development and scoot up to the edge of my seat, but Zozo, who's sitting next to me, gives me a kick under the desk and I relax back into my previous position.

Please forgive me for being such an indiscreet woman.

"He went into the forest and he hasn't come back."

The woman making this request, Ms. Maria, cuddles the little girl sitting on her knees a little tighter as she tells me this. Her dark brown hair is a little curly. She's wearing a barrette that holds most of her hair towards the back of her head, but between her long bangs that hang down over her face, I can see her green eyes, and they show her exhaustion. She sometimes smiles reflexively down at the little girl in her lap when she gets excited, but her mind seems somewhere else entirely.

"It's already been a full night without any contact from him."

According to what she tells me, this whole affair began when her husband, Gouda Krain, had gone into the forest, in search of a single farm animal that had wandered in there. The Krain house is situated on a large farm where they raise herbivorous, six-legged "pokkels" to sell at the food markets. On the east side of their farm, next to the mountain, a pokkel had escaped into the forest.

There's a fence along the edge of the forest that's enchanted with a simple anti-demon spell, so it's not like the farm is completely defenseless against demons. But there had been no evidence that a demon had tried to breach the fence, and furthermore they hadn't even seen any demons nearby when the pokkel had escaped. The family seemed to doubt the neighborhood rumors that demons had been sighted in their area.

With that information, it makes sense when Maria tells me that her husband hadn't seemed too concerned about going into the forest to look for the escaped pokkel.

"I'll bring it back soon, alright?"

"Take care, dear."

He hadn't seemed concerned about the rumors, so she hadn't objected to him going into the forest, seeing him off with a smile. She'd thought that he'd

be back within a few hours, but even after sundown, and then a whole night, Mr. Gouda hadn't come back home, so she'd begun to find the whole situation worrisome. She'd thought about going into the forest herself, but if he *had* been attacked by demons... She was too afraid to go in there after him with a little girl waiting at home, all alone, so she had decided to come to Harré instead.

She herself could use the most basic level of magic necessary to go about her daily routine, but she had no magical skills that would be useful against a demon, so it's probably all for the best that she came here. She'd told me she hadn't wanted to put her neighbors' lives in danger by asking them to find her husband, so making a request here at Harré had been the only option left to her.

"So the pokkel came back to the farm after that, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. My husband went into the forest, and then right before dusk it came running back, as if it was fleeing from something."

"That sounds a little strange, doesn't it?"

From her seat next to me, Zozo takes the request form in hand and takes a closer look at it.

"Ms. Maria, as you know, there are demons in this forest. But in the past couple of years, we haven't heard of a single sighting, let alone a report of an attack."

Of all four directions of the compass, the safest part of the forest is the eastern part. However, while it may be called the "safest," that doesn't change the fact that it is still dangerous.

"Having said that, we have also gotten requests similar to this one."

"Similar requests?"

Ms. Maria tenses up when she hears Zozo's words. The child she's holding in her lap lets out a small whimper as her mother squeezes her, and looks up at her with tears in her eyes. *Hold on for just one more moment, little lady.*

"There's an elderly woman who's gone missing in the area near the northern

edge of the forest.”

Zozo points up at a specific request form on the job board.

Just a few days ago, a woman had come into Harré with the request. Her grandmother had gone for a walk around a pond near the edge of the northern forest, and she hadn't come back. The two of them had been living together, and after she'd seen off her grandmother heading out for her daily walk, she'd left home herself to go to work.

That had been the last time she had seen her, and while there had been a neighbor who'd said they *had* seen an old woman at a tavern near the pond, they weren't sure if it had been her grandmother or not. Several sorcerers had accepted the assignment, but as of yet, the request hadn't been fulfilled.

Hold on a second. I turn to ask Zozo a question.

“A psychometric analysis was performed, correct?”

“Yes, Harris asked a sorcerer to do that for her, apparently.”

“Psychometry” is a specific type of magic where the mage casts a spell on any inorganic form—a stone, a patch of ground, a tree, a building—and the mage is able to summon the memories of the object. Use it on a patch of ground and it's possible to find out who passed through the area and when, use it on a building and you can find out who entered and at what time. The memories appear as three-dimensional images in the air, suspended near the object. A very high degree of skill is necessary to successfully cast the spell, not to mention superior concentration, intellect, imagination... Unless you are able to focus all of your senses on the object and its memories, the spell would fail.

Among the sorcerers who regularly come into Harré to fulfill requests is a sorcerer quite skilled at psychometry. The sorcerer had searched the whole area, thinking that they would be able to find some hint that would help solve the case. Not too many people could perform psychometry, but for cases of missing items or persons, it was usually easy to solve them by using it.

“It's odd that we've had this series of disappearances in the forest recently, don't you think?”

That sorcerer, however, could find almost no trace of the woman using

psychometry. The only thing they had found was a single stump that had “remembered” the woman sitting on it to rest.

“Alkes, perhaps it would be a good idea for us to do a preliminary investigation for this request? No sorcerers have been harmed yet in these forest cases, but it’d be better to do an investigation now to hopefully ensure it stays that way.”

“Hmm? Zozo, you planning on going out to do that?”

One of the male employees who sits behind us, Alkes, calls out to Zozo as he’s making copies of some paperwork. Alkes used to be a part of the Order of Knights. He’s taken care of me almost as much as Zozo since I’ve arrived, and he’s usually doing some sort of administrative work in the seat where he’s sitting now. As the person who accompanies the Director whenever she goes outside Harré on business or to attend official meetings, he’s basically like the “Vice Director,” even though that position doesn’t actually exist at Harré.

“I’m going with Nanalie.”

“With Hel?”

Zozo has a sneaky look on her face as she says that. Alkes and I look at each other.

Alkes has jet-black hair. His eyes are blue, and they slant downwards a bit at the edges. *Not exactly the most energetic-looking guy.* He acts how he looks, too, eating snacks at his desk despite the fact he’s in the middle of work, seeming to not care about how such behavior might appear to others. He isn’t at all fat, though—mysteriously, he has a rather trim figure. *Where’s all that sugar going?* He looks even thinner than he might otherwise thanks to the black of the Harré uniform he has on.

“Hmmm.”

?

A short while passes, after which he smiles and says, “That should be alright, don’t you think?” What exactly he’s thinking “should be alright” is as of yet a mystery to me. My eyes grow wide as I take a look at the paper Alkes hands to me.

“A preliminary... investigation.”

“Yeah. You’re going.”

Preliminary investigations are for those requests that Harré deems to be dangerous, and are occasions on which at least one employee goes out to investigate the area of the request and the potential dangers inherent within, before we actually agree to post the job up on the notice board.

I mentioned earlier that it’s quite common for the male employees to do “fieldwork,” and by that I had been mainly referring to these preliminary investigations.

It’s been half a year since I began working here at Harré.

I’ve become completely accustomed to my usual work of making copies, but my heart is *pounding* with excitement at this unexpected turn of events.

I hadn’t even dreamed of being able to do fieldwork until after my first year here.

“But Ms. Zozo, I—”

I’m a little worried about this because the Director said that she wouldn’t have me do any other work during my first year besides my office tasks. I can’t just do some other job without the Director’s permission. It’s not like I’m dissatisfied with my current work, and I had been content to wait until I received the Director’s formal approval before I started doing anything else. I would, graciously and without hesitation, back out of being a part of any preliminary investigation team if she told me “no” right now.

So here I am, with Zozo, who is completely intent on taking me with her to do this investigation, but I mention the fact that I haven’t, technically, received the Director’s permission to do so.

“Goodness, were you worried about something like that?”

“Yes?”

She completely disregards my misgivings and tells me it is “okay.” *That was unexpected.* My eyes grow even wider than they had when I’d first been handed the preliminary investigation report paper.

“Is it really ‘okay’?”

“The truth is that about a month ago, the Director took me aside and asked me to do something like this. ‘If there’s a preliminary investigation that comes up that you think you could take her on, make sure you do,’ is what she said.”

“Director Locktiss said that?”

“We tell all of our new recruits to ‘wait for your second year’ for work like this, but you’ve gotten used to the work rather quickly, and you seem to have a good head on your shoulders. Plus, you did manage to always get second place in the magic school grade rankings, I hear.”

“Second place.” Those words stab into my heart like a bloodthirsty knife. *I didn’t even have any time to prepare for that!*

“It would be a shame if you forgot how to fight. As if you ever would, haha. So you don’t need to worry about *that*, okay?”

Zozo goes on talking without noticing how I am clenching one hand to my chest, trying to stem the emotional bleeding caused by that cruel reminder of my grades during my school days.

“Excellent!” (She hasn’t waited for any reaction from me.) “Alkes, I don’t suppose you mind if we head out now?”

“That was quick. I’ll be sitting here while you’re gone, though, so it’s fine. I’ll tell the Director about it too.”

“Thanks.”

I’m caught up in this conversation that keeps charging on ahead without me. I take a glance over at Ms. Maria to see how she’s taking this new development. She’d been looking over here as well, and when I look at her, our eyes meet.

“Will you be going out to the forest now?”

“Yeah, these kinds of situations are battles against the clock. We’ll make sure we can get you that finalized request form by the end of today.”

“Th-thank you so much!”

Ms. Maria looks back and forth between Zozo and me, and bows to us both

several times.

“Please, please do whatever you can.”

“Ma—...?”

The little girl looks puzzled as she watches her mother bow over and over. She has her thumb in her mouth, looking as if she has absolutely no idea what is going on. *Of course she doesn't. She's only two years old, after all.* It appears that she thinks the reason her father hasn't come home yet is because he went to go “play” in the forest.

The girl smiles at Ms. Maria as she picks her up and sets her on the ground. They take a few steps away from the reception desk, and then turn around to give me one final bow. “We'll be back tomorrow,” she says, and then they head out the front door of Harré.

The little girl, still holding her mother's hand, looks back and gives us a wave. “Bye-bye!”

* * * *

“That really is an adorable lykos, isn't it?”

“I am very proud of Lala. She is the most adorable lykos in the world!”

“Nanalie, you're quite the devoted parent, aren't you?”

“I am no parent. I am simply devoted to Lala,” I say to Zozo. “Your Purl is quite a looker himself, isn't he?”

Zozo's familiar is a magical creature named “Futera Ryodari,” a winged lion. It's a great beast with wings sprouting from its back, and it can change the length of its tail at will.

“You think so? Thanks.”

Zozo and I are riding our familiars towards the eastern forest so that we can complete the preliminary investigation for Ms. Maria's request.

Looking down at the kingdom from above, it is quite easy to see how the realm is surrounded by the forest. Sure, it's nice to be surrounded by such lush greenery, but when I consider the fact that demons make their homes in those

woods, I can hardly be grateful for the trees that hem us in from all sides. It's impossible to be completely at ease, knowing that we are living next to the constant threat of danger coming from those woods.

The Knights, it would seem, periodically repair the invisible magical barrier that stands between the kingdom's edge and the forest, but on occasion that barrier is broken through, so we can't let our guard down. Plus, while it may be difficult for demons to come out of the forest and into the kingdom, there's nothing to prevent humans from leaving the kingdom, going into the forest, and becoming victims of demon attacks. That particular flaw in the system causes no end of trouble.

"So that's the eastern forest, and there's Ms. Maria's farm, right? Look, you can see pokkels."

I hold the map in my hands, twisting it round and round until I figure out the direction that matches up with what I see, checking to make sure all the landmarks match. Here and there across the green farmland are large numbers of ash-gray pokkels.

"All those pokkels, destined to be meat on someone's table..."

"Speaking of which, we still haven't had anything to eat."

My stomach growls as I sit on Lala's soft back, enjoying the feel of the wind against my skin. I'd entirely forgotten how hungry I was, but at Zozo's words I felt a sudden *hunger* take over my body. Hunger, and an accompanying sense of despair.

Looking over at me as I hold my stomach, Zozo gives me a thumbs up and says, "I'll treat you to dinner tonight." She winks and smiles, and in that moment she looks practically radiant. *She is so cool. I hope someday that I can be as cool a woman as she is.*

"According to Ms. Maria, Mr. Gouda entered the forest from over there," I say.

"That seems correct. There are pokkel there, and that area is right at the edge of the eastern forest. But there's a fence—do you think the pokkel jumped over it?"

“When pokkels sense danger, they get down on all six legs and run quite fast, fast enough that they can clear trees when they jump, or so I’ve heard.”

“That must be what happened, then.”

We’ve gotten permission from Ms. Maria to be on the farm, so Zozo and I land on a bit of pasture near the eastern edge of the forest. We dismount as quietly as possible so as not to frighten the pokkels. Fortunately, the area in which we land doesn’t have any pokkels nearby. They are all grouped together in other parts of the farm, so it seems like they are actively avoiding this area.

“Perhaps they sense some foul aura from this part of the forest. Instinct, I suppose.”

“That may be right. Ms. Zozo, shall we cross over to the other side of the fence now?”

“Yes, I think—wait, what *is* this? Has the forest always been this creepy?”

“It is rather dark, isn’t it?”

Directly before us stands the fence between us and the forest, and coming through it, I can feel an ever so slight breeze that makes my hair stand on end. Not a single pokkel is near this part of the forest. Even though the sun is up, the air suddenly feels cold as we draw closer to the trees. I can feel gooseflesh racing down my arms, even under the sleeves of my white Harré uniform.

“*Oooh*,” I shiver, quickly reaching out to pick up the now-shrunk Lala and place her on my shoulder.

Zozo’s winged lion became a small cat, and jumped on top of her head to ride there. The little cat has lost all of the intimidating presence of a lion, and looks to be about one hundred times cuter than before.

“Oh, that’s right—Nanalie, would you mind noting any special features of demons that we might encounter, and write those down on the preliminary investigation forms under the ‘warnings and environmental hazards’ field?”

“Yes ma’am,” I say, pulling out the papers Alkes had handed me from the small bag on my belt. Next to the little bag hangs the Cudgel of the Goddess. I give it a little reassuring *pat* before opening up the folded papers.

“Let’s go.”

“Wha—!”

I just about ripped the papers in half.

“We’re already going into the forest?”

“We have to take care of this before the sun sets, you know?”

Without another word, she grabs my arm and pulls me with her towards the forest.

Zozo is silent and unswerving as we head into the woods. *She’s braver than I am, that’s for sure. It’s reassuring to work at Harré with so many women who are strong in both body and mind.*

Upon entering the forest, the trees and undergrowth become so thick that everything I can see is cloaked in twilight. The trees grow in close thickets, with hardly any space in the canopy for the sunlight to get through. *That’s probably why it felt cold when we entered the forest.*

But it isn’t just the chill air that I find unusual: throughout the whole ride here, we’d flown by many little birds, and had constantly felt the presence of some animal or other above or below us. The instant we set foot into the woods, however, all of that had disappeared. I can’t hear the call of even one bird. It’s difficult to judge whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing that there’s nothing around us at the moment, considering that any noises we might hear could be made by demons. At the very least, nothing *living* is nearby at the moment.

Perhaps no animals make their home in this part of the woods. I pause, thinking it over some more. *But even if there are demons in this part of the forest, for non-magical animals, demons shouldn’t pose any threat to them at all... right?*

“Lady Nanalie, I can sense no animals nearby.”

“You’re right. I don’t even see any bugs flying around.”

“It’s odd, isn’t it?”

The farther we continue into the forest, the darker the twilight becomes, until

no light at all illuminates our way forward. I hold out my arm and I can see nothing beyond my fingertips.

With a *snap*, I conjure a ball of light. Its warm glow spills out from right above my palm, and I let it float up to hang in the air above Zozo and me.

We should be able to see a little better now.

“All that’s left is this: the Coat of Many Colors, *Paltin Teton*.”

Zozo had taken a look up at my light, said “Now it’s my turn,” and cast the “Coat of Many Colors” spell on both me and herself. The “Coat of Many Colors” spell is, put simply, a bit of magic that makes one invisible. A thin membrane now surrounds Zozo and myself, and that membrane changes colors to match our surroundings. Even someone standing right next to us would not be able to see us through this membrane, so she had essentially made us invisible with this spell.

I had recently mastered this spell myself. It had been too difficult for me to pull off back in my school days, and not even Rockmann had been able to cast it. That said, most of the employees at Harré were able to use this spell, and I’d been told that it was absolutely necessary in my work duties. In preparation for the day I’d need it, I’d had Zozo teach me some tricks for casting it, and I’d finally managed to learn how.

So this is the kind of situation that they had been referring to. With an investigation like this, you absolutely needed that spell.

“Did you hear something just now?”

Zozo grabs my arm and pulls me back.

“Hear something?”

“Like a *rustle* of something in the underbrush.”

We both stand there and look around. I dim the light a little, and we quietly search the area around us.

Then, from right before us, I hear that same small, dry *rustle*. We’re only fifty steps into the forest—have we encountered something already?

Zozo and I instantly crouch down where we stand, keeping a wary watch out

for the source of the sound. We're in the middle of a darkening wood. Without wind or even a breeze, not a branch or blade of grass stirs. We focus our gaze on the place the sound came from, although it's wrapped in total darkness.

"Guhah, guhah..."

Zozo and I look at each other. *What's making that noise?* As far as I know, no animal makes a noise like that. *Whether or not it is an animal, however...*

The ground around us is flat, without even the slightest slope up or down in any direction. I feel no animals inside this forest, and no light reaches us this deep in the woods, but I hear this strange sound—the cry of an animal? *That's about all we've discovered so far.*

The sound is disturbing, but I know that once we identify the source of the sound, we'll be heading back immediately. *Anyway, no matter how frightened I might be, I'll never be able to go back to Harré without knowing what, exactly, is making that sound.* I'm sure Zozo will tell me everything that comes after discovering the "what" of the problem is an issue for the sorcerers to take care of, but I can't just abandon the "how" and "why" of this mystery, for a reason—curiosity—entirely my own. *I won't do anything less than a thorough investigation.*

It's likely because of this particular trait of mine that clients sometimes tell me that I'm "going too far."

Our role as Harré employees is decidedly *not* to resolve every issue that comes our way. Zozo had told me that we're supposed to say to the sorcerers, "Take care of this issue, in this place, within this period of time." *Being an intermediary is rough.*

However, if, due to circumstances beyond our control, the sorcerers face some sort of unexpected danger or new development with the request situation, they come back complaining to us at Harré. *For sorcerers, who should know that they are risking their lives in their line of work, it certainly feels odd to have them complaining to us about on-the-job dangers.* There are times when it feels like no matter how thoroughly we perform our preliminary investigation, our efforts will be for naught.

All we're doing is doing our jobs, just as we believe they should be done, aren't

we? Sure, there are employees who say they “can’t take this whining” whenever they hear about another complaint from a sorcerer, but in the end, they still work their hardest for the kingdom and the other people, the sorcerers and our clients.

Our job isn’t as flashy as being a Knight, but we have something more precious that we take care of. The little people, and their little problems, down here on the ground.

Sometimes not so little problems.

“Ms. Zozo, over there, can you see those strange lights? ...Oh, they’re gone now.”

“Where?”

For just a second, I had seen strange lights.

Deep in the forest in front of us, floating in the darkness, three strange lights had glowed.

“They were three small... red, or maybe purple, lights. Forward and to our right.”

“Where now?”

“In that area,” I say, turning sideways towards her as I speak—but the instant I do so, my entire body freezes.

“GUHAH.”

A strange creature with three eyes is right behind us. From what I can see in the dim light cast by my light sphere, it looks to be about halfway as tall as a tree.

It seems like it’s a little ways away from where we crouch, but still...

“...”

...Hold on, is that a demon? A magical creature? Someone, please tell me what’s going on. Is this a demon or something else? I can’t see all of it, but I’m not quite sure. Someone... or something?

With our invisibility spells, nothing should be able to see us right now, but

those three eyes are locked onto us.

“Ms. Zozo.” I try and whisper in my softest voice. I don’t want this demonic creature to notice us.

The only reassuring thing about this whole situation is that she seems to have already understood what’s going on, and is firmly holding my arm, totally still. I slowly reach around to the back of my belt and pull out the Cudgel of the Goddess.

No point in extinguishing that light above us now, I think.

“Nanalie,” Zozo whispers.

“Yes ma’am.”

“I think that’s a demon.”

She’s brought her face right up against my ear and is speaking very, very quietly. I do the same and whisper back, very quietly, “Ms. Zozo, let’s get out of here.”

“You’re right. We’ve seen enough. But before we leave, I need something that we can use for psychometry. Let’s take one of the leaves the demon is touching and bring it back to Harré with us.”

“We’ll be able to see the demon’s shape using psychometry once we get back to Harré, right?”

“Right.”

I am absolutely astonished that she is maintaining her cool in this situation.

We need to get out of here. Now.

“Ms. Zozo, I have a magic circle ready that can teleport us. Why don’t we use that to escape?”

“Isn’t that an ancient spell?”

“I had the Cudgel of the Goddess absorb the circle the other day, for a time like this.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Only those who I allow to enter the circle can be affected by the spell, so I don’t think that demon will be able to tag along if we use it.”

“Then it’s decided. I’ll cast the Coat of Many Colors on Purl in his small form, and we’ll distract the demon while he goes and grabs one of those leaves next to the demon. Can you do that, Purl?”

She looks up at the familiar sitting on top of her head.

“I can do it,” he says, and with that, leaps down from her head and quietly lands on the ground.

It’s okay, I reassure myself, no way is that demon going to notice an odd little beast like that.

“Alright then, here we go.”

I enlarge the cudgel in my hands and quickly retreat away from the demon with Zozo. I look back swiftly and the instant I do so, the demon with its strange *growl* charges towards us. All I can see are the three glowing eyes, so it’s difficult to tell just how close it is, but judging by the rustle of the grass and the increasing volume of that *growl*, I know it’s getting closer.

“Teleport!”

I pull Zozo in close and stab the Cudgel of the Goddess upright into the ground.

Everything appears to be happening in slow motion.

I focus on our destination.

Beyond the market, beneath the Royal Isle. Behind Harré, just in front of the back door. There, where only employees go in and out of the building, is where we need to be now.

“GAHGAH, grrrrrrrrr...”

The demon is trying to enter the magic circle, but it’s being repelled by an invisible barrier. Sparks fly with a *zap!* every time it slams into it.

Those three eyes glow ever more strangely, sizing us up. No matter how closely I look at the thing, I cannot figure out anything else about it.

“Purl! Come on.”

Purl had skillfully managed to grab one of the dead leaves in his mouth, and once I’ve verified that he’s entered the magic circle, I recite the incantation to teleport. At my incantation, the circle flares gold, and a brilliant light surrounds us.

“Wow Nanalie, this is amazing! Just what I’d expect from someone who got second place in the class rankings!”

OUCH! That hurt. Did she need to emphasize that? Is she trying to irritate me?

Those words, “second place,” lance through my heart. Zozo is caught up in all of the excitement and clapping to herself next to me. *A sharper blade was never known.* It feels even worse to know that she hadn’t said that with any sort of ill intent. *To think that even after I graduate, all my achievements are so carefully explained and dismissed with those words... Perhaps there really is such a thing as the “curse of second place.”*

It’s all thanks to that completely annoying bastard...

“I’m glad it looks like we’re going to be able to complete that request form today.”

“That is nice, isn’t it.”

And so into the light we went, leaving behind the forest.

We escaped from the forest using the magic circle, speedily, accurately teleported from the forest to Harré.

“Huh?”

“...What?”

We’ve escaped... right?

“Why’re you here?”

“Ho-hold on a second, wh-wh-why *you*?!”

Before me is none other than... *him*, my loathsome archenemy. Wearing the black uniform of the Order of Knights, his long, golden hair tied back behind his

head. He has his eyes open wide and is making the face of a total idiot right now. It's the kind of face someone makes after being awoken with a huge splash of cold water.

I guess I shouldn't say he is "before me"—he's actually been pushed to the floor, where he is lying down... with me sitting on top of him.

Hold on a minute, what in the world is going on here? Someone, please, explain this.

"Why, you," I say again. My blue hair dangles down from my head to brush against his cheeks. It seems like it's getting into his eyes, the way he squints and blinks at me over and over. "Is this a dream?" I pinch not my own, but *his* cheek, just to check. I yank his hair a bit, too.

Yeah, that feels like the real thing. He's so warm, and his skin is so soft. No way is this an illusion.

He rapidly twists his arm around to grab my wrist before I poke and prod him any further. The way he grabs me feels real too.

"So this is... real?"

His shoulders seem to have gotten broader in the past six months. He's always been strong, but he has grown so much that it no longer seems possible we were in the same class year. His face, however, hasn't changed at all—its smooth symmetry, the bangs that covered half of it, and the red eyes that peeked out from behind that golden hair, burning with some sort of internal flame. However intense his gaze may seem, I still always feel that familiar clear and calm aura he has about himself.

"I don't suppose you could get off me? You're rather heavy."

"Huh?"

"Is it really that fun to ride on top of me? I don't mind, but I might just throw you right off."

Flames dance at the edge of my vision.

No, anything but that.

"Ahhhhhh! No!"

I hurry to push myself up off of Rockmann. *Did I make a mistake with the teleportation spell? Let's try that again.* I grasp the Cudgel of the Goddess with both hands and thrust it against the floor.

"No, stop."

Rockmann's come close and grabbed my arm, and now he's the one yanking me around. With a 1, 2, 3, we're tripping around like it's a triple-time tango, almost about to fall over into each other again, but I steady myself and the dance is finished. *That was close.*

I try to break away from him. "Get away from me, I don't want to be near *you*," I say, but then the whispers that have been building up around us catch my attention. I sense someone—someones?—standing behind me, and I slowly turn around to look.

"Whoever might this be?"

"That couldn't be Hel, could it?"

"I wonder what she's come to do here?"

I've seen these women before. They're all girls I went to school with.

"What happened with the mansion's security system?!"

An old bearded gentleman is brandishing a pipe and yelling in my general direction. "Who is that woman?"

Next a young man speaks. "Why, this is just some commoner here to cause a ruckus!"

I feel a chill run down my back.

I thought I'd stumbled into some sort of party, and, upon calming down a bit more and looking around, I see young women and respectable ladies wearing beautiful dresses, gentlemen holding up glasses in one hand, all looking as though they had just been having the most wonderful conversation. The whole scene is quite gorgeous, really.

There are several extravagant chandeliers hanging down from the wooden ceiling, creating a dazzling effect on all those standing below. The lights of their candles are reflected in the windows, a sparkling shine from all around. Placed

on the high white dining tables is an array of food so deliciously beautiful that one would hesitate to eat it. I have no idea what it might taste like. It's certainly something I've never had before.

Then there's this aroma, the subtle scent of a flower—something coming from the perfume these ladies are wearing? *No, it's more likely to be from those harunade flowers over there. That refreshing, yet slightly sweet aroma is unmistakable.*

I am, at the very least, wearing the wrong outfit here. I've arrived at a black-tie affair in a white Harré uniform.

It seems like I really did mess up that spell, and was somehow transported elsewhere.

"I'm not... at Harré?"

The gazes of those around me, and the various emotions that charged those gazes, are all weighing quite heavily on me right now. I've just teleported, so I am not *entirely* sure about what's all going on here, but I am undoubtedly trespassing. Conspicuously so.

And then, perhaps this is a rather obvious question, but how, exactly, did I end up here? Whose mansion is this? I'm certain that I specified Harré as the destination for the spell...

"W-wait! What? They're not here?!"

Where're Zozo and the others? Where did they go?

I look left, I look right, they're nowhere to be found, in any direction, front, back, above. Nowhere.

It felt like they were teleported inside the circle with me—there's no way that I accidentally left them behind in the forest, right? It would not be funny at all if I had abandoned them there with that monster. I feel like getting on my hands and knees, face on the ground, and apologizing until blood spills out from my forehead as I scrape it against the ground. I need to find Zozo and the familiars first, however.

"I might have left a colleague at work behind in the forest! I'm sorry, but I'm

in a rush.”

Neither Lala nor Purl are within sight. *What am I going to do?*

I’m trying to get away from this place as fast as I can, but Rockmann drags me in the opposite direction of the exit. “Just hold on a second, okay?”

“Why? How come I have to wait for anything?” I ask, trying once again to wrench my arm away from him, but his grip wavers not in the slightest.

The only way to get out of this is going to be to freeze his hands right off, isn’t it?

...Still, no matter how one looks at this situation, the one who’s done something wrong is unmistakably me, so I can’t resort to force to get myself out of here.

Considering that I came out of nowhere, knocked him down, and crashed that whole party going on in this lovely hall, I really should be apologizing to him.

“Just who *is* that little girl? She’s acting awfully familiar with Sir Alois, don’t you think?”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t say she’s acting ‘familiar’ at all, Mother. She’s the same age as I am; we had gone to the same school. Why, she’s just some reckless young woman who sought to challenge Sir Alois over and over. Rather impudent of her, don’t you think, Sally? They don’t have *that* kind of relationship.”

“Yes, that’s quite true, they’re nothing of *that* sort. But for a commoner, she was always friendly with me, I suppose.”

“Oh, is that so? Betty, Sally, weren’t we all friends with her? I’ll admit that, from time to time, I’d seek out romantic advice from Hel, you know.”

“Lady Marge, did you really? I confess that I too sometimes asked her to explain topics from lessons I hadn’t quite understood.”

From the corners of the room, I hear the whispers swirl about me, and I nod my head in affirmation. *I’m not “friendly” at all with this guy. He’s totally my worst enemy!*

I’d frequently interacted with those girls who were speaking of me. We had

shared the same classroom for six years, after all, so I remember them quite well. I'm not sure if they'd call me "harmless" in a situation like this, but they'd come up to talk to me about their various romantic entanglements several times, the conversation starting, every time, with those magic words: "I haven't told anyone else this yet, but—" Mostly I'd just listened, not saying anything at all, but I think I helped them, in a way—I had always let them speak to their heart's content.

Based on the people I see in this room, it seems like those girls are having a party with their other aristocrat friends.

"Would you—would you let go of me for a second?"

Now standing, Rockmann towers far above me. His hand is still gripping my wrist, and I notice that his thumb and middle finger are easily wrapped around it, the fingertips of both pressed firmly against each other. *Not likely that I'll be able to escape very easily.* The way he holds my arm makes me feel like it's just a stick of wood.

Even though he, as a Knight of the Order, must spend far more time out in the field than I do, his skin is so pale that I'm jealous. It seems even paler with the contrast created by the black Knight's uniform he's wearing. And then there's that golden hair that looks long enough to hang down to his shoulders, carefully tied back, making him look all the more sophisticated.

In the past I'd thought that his face looked like a pretty girl's, but now I see it's changed to take on that special sharpness of form seen in the faces of young men, and it's strangely dazzling to me. *Dazzling.*

"Um, sorry for barging in, uninvited..."

"...?"

I can't be as stubborn around him as I used to be. Nothing good will come of it. I've got to grow up already, move forward, and set aside such childish antics.

I've never once made a straightforward apology to Rockmann for anything, so perhaps that's why he's looking so confused right now. He doesn't stare at me stupidly, or seriously, or anything else, he just seems puzzled.

"But, I really do have to go—"

I'm coming, Ms. Zozo! Lala! Purl!

"Alois, what's going on? There's some woman causing a commotion out in front of the mansion... Hm? Who might this girl be?"

"Father."

"Only aristocrats should be on the grounds right now. I thought that by holding this banquet you'd be able to make a good impression on Queen Corolla before you accompany her to the ball at the palace tonight... unless you'd prefer to accompany this young lady instead?"

The sudden appearance of the gentleman before us throws all my plans of escape into the wind.

This man, who Rockmann had called "Father," is wearing indigo riding wear, sporting an impressive beard, and is handsome to boot. His hair is brown, and he hardly resembles Rockmann at all. Except for his eyes—they have that same forceful look, perhaps as a result of the dashing, manly set of his eyebrows.

Still, is this really His Grace the Duke Michael Arnold Rockmann the Third? Certainly the first time I've had the pleasure of meeting him.

He mentioned "holding a banquet," which must mean this is Duke Rockmann's mansion, right? Which means this is where he lives, isn't it.

"Hmm? What say you, son?" Those blue eyes of his are looking rather closely at the way Rockmann (the young, idiot one) is holding my arm.

It seems that the Duke is misunderstanding this whole situation.

"It's-it's not that, Your Grace! You've completely got it wrong, no need to worry about me!"

The ladies around me had acted quite disturbed upon hearing Duke Rockmann's words. Instantly, I feel their various gazes, soft and unassuming just moments ago, sharpen as they stare into me. *Cut it out! Rockmann and I aren't like "that."* The Duke seems amused as he sees me begin to panic. *Why's he acting all relaxed? Shouldn't he be a little more concerned, seeing his son talk with a lowly commoner like me, with whom he might have some sort of "illicit" connection? I don't, but still...*

Rockmann, on the other hand (the younger one), still hasn't figured out what's going on and refuses to let go of my arm. *What's his deal?*

"Ah... Father. You may say as much, but you've been watching us from behind that pillar ever since she arrived, haven't you? Please, don't be too extravagant in your jokes at my expense. Also, Hel, I believe the person you referred to as your 'work colleague' is likely right outside the mansion."

The Duke mentioned a "woman causing a commotion" just a few moments ago, didn't he?

"What? Outside?"

"This place has been charmed so that no one who is not a trusted acquaintance of the Duke's household may enter. Should some stranger attempt to trespass, they shall be thrown into an endless maze, eventually finding their way back outside our grounds."

"But how do you know that she's outside?"

"I'm the one who placed the charm. The appearances of those who've activated it appear in my mind at the moment of attempted trespass. Your colleague is a beautiful woman with dark brown skin, right?"

What's this charm he's talking about? I've never heard of it. Is it something he made up, or has it just not ever come up in my readings?

"And just *where* did you learn this spell-trap?"

"Oh, I made it up myself."

HUH? I'm so dizzy that I feel like I need to sit down. He's making up spells for himself now too? The shock is like a punch to the head.

After graduation, everyone had gone off, so busy in making their own way in life, but *this bastard* has not only been appointed captain of the smallest unit of the Knights in less than a year after joining the Order, he's also been thinking up helpful new spells on the side. *He's no longer just one rank above me, he's off the charts. If he goes any further, he'll achieve escape velocity and leave the stratosphere. Just when am I going to finally beat him at something?*

Anyway, but what about Zozo, then? We'd both made it out of the forest, but

she'd triggered the charm surrounding the Duke's house, got lost in some dark maze, and then thrown outside the front gates?

I'm so sorry Ms. Zozo!

I'm so sorry!

I'll never be able to apologize enough to her for the trauma she just went through.

"Du-Duke Rockmann, Your Grace, please forgive me for trespassing! I am deeply, deeply sorry! I made a mistake in a spell I cast while working, and that resulted in me crashing your lovely banquet, I am, truly..."

I finally yank my arm out of Rockmann's grip and make a sincere apology to Duke Rockmann. I've lowered my head so far that I feel like I'm about to be absorbed by the floor. I don't care for Rockmann, but the man before me, the Duke, has nothing to do with my dislike for his son.

He, surprisingly enough, makes no complaint at all as I yank free of him.

"Now, now, please, enough with all that bowing. Was that the case? With that uniform, you must be from Harré. Your appearance was a surprise, certainly, but interesting nonetheless. It seems as though you are in a hurry—are you alright?"

"I am so very sorry! Yes, I am in a bit of a rush at the moment, a demon... Never mind!"

"A demon?"

Rockmann looks at me carefully, hanging onto the word "demon" that had escaped my lips.

This is bad. I almost told everyone about what we saw on our investigation, before I've even made an official report at Harré.

He looks at me and asks again, "What's this about a demon?" I turn far, far away from him, dodging the question. *As if I'd ever tell you! We're bound by a code of secrecy as well, you know.*

A little while passes and he seems to give up on getting anything out of me. He no longer has that piercing look in his eyes. *Not that I feel any more relaxed*

around him.

He is, probably due to his affiliation with the Order of Knights, a little concerned about the possibility of a demon. Demons manage to cause even the Order a great deal of trouble, so I suppose that's understandable.

"Anyway, where had you planned on going?"

Rockmann's eyebrows are knit close in confusion. *As always, he has that sullen look on his face whenever he turns to me. For him to knit his eyebrows in that way... Wasn't he ever taught by his parents that his face would end up like that permanently if he kept doing that?* I've heard that one's daily habits in youth ended up having a large effect on one's body in old age, so he needs to be more careful about things like that.

Still, I'm not in any position to go around lecturing others; I've hardly ever given this guy a smile, so perhaps I'll end up with a permanent frown on my face in old age.

"I had intended to go to Harré."

We may have been in the same class year in school, but he's the son of a duke. He may be my arch-rival, but he's the son of a duke. He may be an infuriating bastard, but he's the son of a duke.

Perhaps it's a little late now, but I should try speaking to him more politely.

I remember what Miss Maris had told me some time ago: "While you're at school it's all well and good, but should you ever see Rockmann outside of school, particularly with other aristocrats around, you must take care *not* to speak so casually with him."

She herself hadn't seemed to mind at all if I spoke to her casually wherever we might be, but I had taken Maris's words to heart. She'd said it had to do with the "rules of aristocracy" or something or other. Not that I knew what that meant, but I had understood her warning to be a serious one.

Maris, it's okay that I snapped at him earlier, right? I'm speaking very politely now, so it's all good... right?

"Hmm, really?"

Rockmann raises an eyebrow at my reply, and then in the next instant that unpleasant sneer sneaks across his face. *What a bastard he is. Making fun of my mistake. If you weren't the son of a duke, I'd take your pretty face, your perfect grades, your successful career, and shove it right into your BASTARD—*

I clearly don't have much to say to him. All I hear in the back of my mind is the far-off whinings of some loser. Whoever could that be?

Anyhow, I don't want to appear any more pathetic than I already am, so I refrain, just this once, from cursing him out then and there. Anything I might say, of course, would be *true*—but still, I refrain.

"I'd intended on going to Harré, but somehow I ended up here."

When we'd teleported using the magic circle, I'm sure that I'd been thinking of Harré. In the "Book of Spells," it had said to "turn your mind away from all other worldly concerns and focus all your heart and mind on the thought of your destination."

Hadn't I done just that?

I'd done nothing other than think of...

"Alright second-place!"

"..."

Nothing other than...

"Alright second-place!"

"..."

Nothing other...

"Alright second place!"

Nothing...

"...What have I done?!"

I fall down on my knees.

I put both of my dirty, *dirty* commoner hands on the beautiful marble floor, and without letting a single tear fall, begin to cry.

It was definitely that moment.

That moment when, at the very last second before we teleported, my heart had been broken by those two words Zozo had said: “second place.”

And then of course, like any other natural phenomenon, *his* face had appeared in my mind’s eye. All those horrible memories of him back during our school days. I’d been so thoughtless that it had taken me this long to realize my fatal mistake.

What an utter failure I am! How can I be this stupid? I had been concentrating so hard, and to have been done in by something as small as those two words... If my life had been in mortal danger, how would it have all turned out, making a mistake like that?

“I understand now,” I say.

“?”

“When I teleported, I thought of this young man... Sir Alois. I believe my mind wandered and I—I thought of him when I cast the spell.”

“Oho, is that so...?”

I slowly stand back up and turn back towards the Duke. The Duke nods his head upon hearing my words and strokes his beard. *That really is quite a wonderful beard.*

“...Hold on, don’t you think there’s another way you could have said that? Father is *massively* misunderstanding what’s going on because of what you’re saying. You’re you, after all, so I’m sure it was just you thinking of something stupid, as usual.”

Rockmann, who’s been standing next to me—well, I suppose it’s a little confusing to say “Rockmann,” as there are two of them right nearby, so I suppose I’ll refer to him as “Alois” here... No, I can’t do that. I just don’t like it. I don’t like calling people by their first name. I hadn’t even ever called Satanás by his first name back when we were at school! I’m not using his first name, not here, not in my thoughts, not ever.

Rockmann’s looking at me with his arms folded.

“I wasn’t thinking of anything stupid at all! It was something extremely serious, a truly *pressing* concern of mine.”

“I told you, try to phrase it some other way, would you? It’s pathetic how *truly* idiotic you are.”

“...”

This guy’s so thick, he must have a skull made of iron. I can feel, every so often, one of the veins on my forehead pop in frustration at this bastard’s bullshit.

Stay cool, Nanalie, stay cool. Retort something clever back now, and you’ll be made fun of as just another commoner without any common sense. You’re already trespassing, and starting an argument would be going overboard. I am such an idiot. Still just a mage-in-training, a new employee at Harré. I’ve done something horrible to Ms. Zozo, too. I really need to sit down and reflect on all the poor choices I’ve made. Alone.

“Duke Rockmann, Your Grace, while I can’t say it is enough to make up for what I’ve done, if you wouldn’t mind, would you please take this as a token of my sincere regret? It’s nothing at all suspicious.”

I take out a single piece of yellow paper from the small bag around my belt and hold it out to the Duke.

“Mm? This is an ancient magic circle, I believe.”

“It is a spell of Absolute Defense. It can only be used once, but it creates an unbreakable barrier that none will be able to get through. With this, you won’t have to worry if someone like me comes trespassing into your mansion.”

“Even so, drawing this circle required an extraordinary amount of time and effort, did it not?”

“...”

I look right at the magic circle as he says this to me, softly, calmly. I’d drawn it up to use someday. I had made another one that I’d had the cudgel absorb, but just to be *absolutely sure*, I’d made an extra.

“My sons are all outstanding. Forgive me for saying this, but they are all good-

looking as well. They have immense natural talent with magic. The fact that they can do anything they set their minds to works in their favor as well. Talented and intelligent.”

At first I thought he had just decided to start bragging about his sons, but at some point I understand that this is the preamble for something else, so I sit quiet and listen close. There’s nothing disagreeable in his words (everything he says is true, in fact), so I say not a word as I hear him speak.

He, on the other hand, seems to find being praised in front of other people an awkward affair, because he’s wandered a bit away to start drinking some fruity liquor-thing that had been on a nearby table.

Excellent, I’ve discovered another weakness of his. He gets embarrassed when his parents praise him. Interesting.

“Perhaps it is because I have such sons that I know that, within just a few minutes since our meeting, you are possessed of great spirit and ability. I’ve heard you were a student who was once a ‘bad-mouthed sore loser’ from Alois, but here you are, a nice young lady full of ambition.”

I’d begun to smile a bit at hearing him praise Alois, but what he says about me makes me freeze with my eyes wide open.

“Sore loser, bad-mouthed, student.”

I glare at Rockmann. *What the hell is that bastard doing, talking about me to his parents?*

“Sore loser,” “bad-mouthed...” Good grief. Well, I suppose those things aren’t “inaccurate,” but surely they’re nothing to write home about. To think that someone’s parents—and not even my own!—think of me that way is rather discomfoting. Extremely discomfoting. Just standing here is uncomfortable. How am I going to sleep after finding this out?

I’ll remember this, bastard. You watch your back when you go down dark alleys at night.

That *idiot*, who’s on the receiving end of my harsh glare, acts like he has no idea what I’m angry about and gives me a yawn. And then, as if he’s finally found what he’s been looking for, he walks away, saying “Hey there, Shelly,”

leaving me alone with his father. *What a lecher.*

...Hm?

Just a minute. The Duke said that he'd heard I was a student who was a "bad-mouthed sore loser." But he also said that he hadn't known my name, or met me before. *How could he have known that I was the student that was a "bad-mouthed sore loser" that Rockmann had been referring to?*

"Please, take good care of this magic circle."

He rests his hand on his chin for a few moments, then hands me back the paper with the magic circle on it.

"But, Your Highness..."

"Now, I won't say that I'm going to ask for something else instead, but I don't suppose you'd mind if I asked you for a favor?"

With Rockmann gone, the Duke and I are alone, well away from everyone else.

"A favor? Whatever might that be?"

"Could you, well, sneak into the ball that's being held at the palace tonight?"

"...Excuse me?"

I think I've just realized what he asked me to do, so I ask him again.

"Sneak into... the ball... at the palace?"

I don't understand what he's going on about, so I freeze up for a few moments, puzzling it over.

"There's something I'd like to check. I was just about to ask someone else to do it, actually."

The Duke is completely ignoring my confusion as he goes on talking. I said earlier that the Duke doesn't resemble Rockmann, but I take that back. It isn't in how they look, but there is definitely *something* that is the same in both of them.

"Check something...? To what might you be referring?"

“I can’t tell you that, but would you mind just doing as I ask?” He winks.
“Please?”

I wish I had the courage to say “no” to a duke’s request. I thought I’d offer to do something as an apology for disturbing his party, but I’m positively terrified at the idea of that “something” being sneaking into the ball at the palace. *Sneaking into someone else’s house? Not for me, not ever. Why would he want me to do so in the first place? He evaded the question when I asked him earlier.*

The people nearby are looking at us suspiciously as we stand whispering to each other. *Mostly looking suspiciously at me.*

But among those staring at us, not a single one of them is a young woman.

The instant Rockmann had separated himself from me, all of the beautiful young ladies had, as one, gathered together around him. *I think that was the first time I’ve ever felt grateful to him.* It is quite a bit more relaxing not to have all those women staring at me.

Still, shouldn’t I be trying to leave here as soon as possible to find Ms. Zozo and return to Harré...?

The Duke sees me trapped in my discomfort, pulls out his own white handkerchief, and casts a spell on it. It slowly, gently floats over to me to stop right before my eyes, and I see that words are being written across its surface by the Duke’s spell. I can’t read what he’s writing because the handkerchief is slowly billowing in the air, but the Duke leans in to whisper in my ear, “Come to the place I’ve written on the handkerchief.”

“I have work, so it’d be difficult for me to come early. Is that alright?”

“Come before the bells chime for the Evening Star, and we’ll have enough time.”

“Is that so...?”

I finish working before the bells toll for the Evening Star. When the bells ring, it’s usually around the time that most people, in normal households, are beginning to eat dinner. Perhaps even a bit later than when they begin to eat dinner. I’m on the day shift, so I finish working at dusk. I’m home before everyone else starts eating dinner.

“Shall I call for the woman you mentioned earlier?”

“What?”

The Duke *snaps* his fingers with both hands. From the ceiling, with a loud *thump*, someone falls.

“Ms. Zozo?!”

“Nanalie—! You’re alright! I was so worried!”

“Ms. Zozo!”

It was Ms. Zozo that had fallen from the ceiling.

Lala and Purl are with her. I embrace her, asking her if she’s injured, halfway sobbing all the while. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” I say over and over.

“If you’re going to apologize that much, I’m going to start feeling guilty, you know, and I’m not even mad at you!” she says in response, flicking my forehead.

The Duke takes the two of us, illegally trespassing as we are, to the front gates of the mansion, and sees us off as we head towards Harré.

I’d checked with the Duke one more time before I left. “Am I good enough for what you want to do? Surely there is some aristocrat woman more suited to this than I, a girl you just met.”

I’d taken the white handkerchief and put it into the little pouch on my belt.

“You’re more than good enough,” he’d said, “you’re exactly the right one for the job.”

What in the world had he meant by that?

We’ve finally made it back to Harré.

I clap my hands together in awe, looking around to see that we’ve safely arrived at our destination. Just a few moments ago, when I’d tried to return from the mansion by getting on my familiar, Zozo had stopped me, saying, “Don’t give up. Why don’t we try that one more time?” I’d taken out the cudgel once more, activated the magic circle for teleportation, and now here we are, back at Harré.

The spell worked! I'm so full of relief and satisfaction that I grab onto Zozo and give her a tight hug.

"You came at me so quickly, I thought you were a beast!" she said, laughing. *Zozo is an amazing co-worker. She may be shorter than me, but I look up to her, I really do.*

I'm just about to apologize to her for everything, but before I can, I feel my lips being sealed with magic. I can't even let out so much as a *groan* through her seal.

"So this is the leaf it touched then, yes?"

Mr. Alkes looks closely at the brown leaf he has in his hand. Holding just the stem, he swirls it round and round.

"Ms. Zozo's Purl took this one from underneath the demon as well," I say, holding out another dry leaf to him. He turns to take the leaf from me, comparing the two. He had been holding a brown leaf, and the one I've just given him is green.

It seems that in order to be absolutely certain we got a leaf the demon had touched, Purl had grabbed two. *What a perfect familiar. Just what I'd expect from Ms. Zozo's winged lion; he does everything right, just like she does. But Lala's pretty awesome too, you know! ...Hold on, who am I competing with right now?*

"With two leaves, we'll probably be able to see it pretty well."

We are, right now, in Harré's backyard. This is the place where employees come to hang out on their breaks. There are chairs made out of small logs, cloth hammocks large enough for someone to lay down on, a water fountain, and a whole lot else, all perfect for resting our tired bodies.

This is where I had tried (and failed) to come using the magic circle. *Not like I have anything to hide about that.* Still, the fact that I failed makes me want to shrivel up into some corner. *Don't look at me. Don't look at me and see how stupid I've been.*

"If you wouldn't mind," I say to Alkes, gesturing towards the leaves.

“We’re counting on you, Alkes.”

“You can leave it to me, Zozo.”

Zozo and I had come here to ask Alkes to perform a psychometric analysis on the leaves. He’d just started his break. When we’d arrived back at Harré, there hadn’t been many clients or sorcerers inside the building. *It seems that the rush hour has already come and gone for today.*

“What d’you think will show up? Exciting, right?” Zozo looks over at me, eyes flashing with anticipation.

“Assistant Director Alkes,” I say, “please begin.”

“I’m not the ‘assistant director,’” he mumbled back.

All around us are other Harré employees. We’ve drawn quite the lively crowd, and their black and white uniforms shift as they draw closer in to see what we’ve got.

They’re all the people who couldn’t catch a break during the rush hour. Now that work had slowed down, it seemed that they’d all been airing their grievances about this sorcerer or that client while eating lunch together. There were a couple of people walking around munching on food they held in one hand, pointing at the leaves with the other.

I’d really, really like to eat something right now. Until we got the request forms finished up for Ms. Maria, however, I didn’t think I could allow myself to kick back and enjoy a nice meal.

She’d left Harré with her small child walking beside her, but on her way out, for some reason she seemed smaller to me than her daughter. Confronted with the disappearance of her husband, she seemed to have shrunk into herself.

“The bugs’ve gotten to these leaves,” Alkes says, placing them carefully on the ground before him.

Everyone is gathered around, looking at them closely. They seem like two entirely ordinary dry leaves. Even I, who knows where they’ve come from, find it hard to believe that there’s any sort of important information hidden inside of them.

“I certainly would like to be able to perform psychometry myself one day soon,” I say wistfully, shaking my head.

“That’s the spirit. Let’s practice together, yeah?” Zozo pats me on the back, encouraging as always.

I still can’t perform psychometry, receptionist-in-training that I am. Zozo herself doesn’t seem to be that skilled with that line of magic, so we had decided to let Alkes, who’s actually rather talented with this sort of stuff, take care of the spellwork for us.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel a little ashamed that we’d brought back more work for someone else to take care of. *And to think, not only were we asking him to do the psychometry for us, but he sat at our reception desk the entire time we were gone, taking care of all our work...*

When we had come back, however, and I’d been very apologetic about making this additional request of him, he told me that it wasn’t “a personal matter,” so I should feel free to ask for help when I needed it. Sure, it seemed like everyone working at Harré took part in whatever project happened to be going on at a given time, but to have him say that directly to me had made me feel much better.

But I don’t want to become someone who’s always asking others for help. I want to be someone who is asked for help. I want to be that kind of mage, that kind of person.

“Alright now, everyone step back a little.”

Alkes motions for the gathering crowd to move back, and then he takes his index finger on his right hand and points it straight at the leaves on the ground.

The caster cannot look away from the object of the spell.

He twirls his finger around and around, counterclockwise, and begins chanting the incantation.

————— *Po!*

A little while passes, and then a small light materializes directly above the leaves. It’s a light smaller than the tip of my pinky finger. The light slowly grows

larger and larger, then contracts to become small again, letting out a black mist that expands out into the air. It looks like fog.

The cloud of mist grows larger and larger, until it takes on the shape of something else.

“Nanalie, are those the three eyes you were talking about?”

One of the other employees, the bespectacled Ms. Harris, taps my shoulder and nods at the mist.

“Yes, those are them. Three, horizontally aligned.”

The demon’s shape isn’t completely clear yet, but three magenta spheres floated in the air, right where its eyes had been.

Alkes stops twirling his finger counterclockwise, reversing to a clockwise turn. The black mist becomes even thicker than before and takes on a defined shape.

“So this is the demon?” Alkes stops moving his fingers.

Before us is the shape of a large, black, four-legged creature. Its body looks like it has the ability to walk on two legs as well. Where its face should be, I see three points of light. Its tongue is monstrously long, extending down to its chest. On either side of its head are two sharp “ears” that have shapes like nothing I’ve ever seen. Its teeth are fangs, and two stick out from each edge of its mouth. On its—skin? hide?—I see nothing that looks like hair, only this *glistening* texture. It doesn’t so much *catch* the light, so much as the light *sticks* to it, and it seems like touching it would feel rather sticky as well. Of course, we can’t actually touch this image, so we can’t be sure about that.

Anyway, if I had to sum it up in a word:

It’s disgusting.

“That’s a tongue like you see on a human corpse.”

“A corpse has a tongue like *that*?”

Alkes has one hand over his mouth, and nods. “Yeah.”

A human tongue?

That sounds rather... disturbing.

A corpse?

“Well maybe not that long, but... One time, when I was out on a preliminary investigation, I came across a human corpse. The corpse was hanging vertically up in the air, tongue lolling out, and it was pretty nasty. Wasn’t weirdly long like this demon’s tongue, but that certainly looks like a human’s dead, nasty tongue.”

“What about other animals?”

“The shape is different. Get a closer look. See how round and thick its tongue is? Look at each others’ tongues and you’ll see what I mean.”

Just as he had said, Zozo and I turn to face each other and stick out our tongues.

I suppose he’s right. The demon’s tongue looks a lot more like a human one than that of a lynx, a phoenix, or a winged lion.

“Pretty sure you all know this, but demons don’t have a specific set of characteristics. Could say the same thing about humans, of course. While their skeletal structure may be the same, their faces are different, some are short and others tall, and they all act differently and have different magic types. That’s all we know about demons. Except for that one, defining feature: all of them can use that unique, specific type of magic they have. It’s that kinetic *force* they possess within them that allows them to use their sinister, demonic abilities. It’s because of that unique feature of theirs that anti-demon spells exist, and while they may not look the same, their colors never differ: a dark, corrupt green intermixed with ash. It’s unique enough to distinguish them from all other creatures.”

“Would the demon before us be a ‘standard’ specimen, then?”

“Well, yeah, no question about it.”

Then, barely seconds after he finished speaking, Alkes reaches his hand out to grab one of the snacks a nearby employee had been eating and begins shoving it in his own mouth. *It’s a bit gross to just gobble down what someone else had been eating, no...? Is he simply impolite? Bold? A total slob?* The employee who he’d stolen the food from looks at him in complete disbelief, stunned that Alkes

has just stuffed his face with the food without so much as a “thank you.”

Well, we did ask him to do this in the middle of his lunch break, so he was probably quite hungry after all that spell work. Speaking of which, I’m rather hungry myself, but I’m not about to go eating other people’s food.

“But Alkes—don’t you feel like you’ve seen a demon like this before? I know that demons don’t all have a specific shape, but just looking at it... I feel like I recognize it.”

“Hm? Yeah... yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Ms. Harris is tilting her head to one side, deep in thought. Alkes chews on that idea for a while, nodding to himself every so often, sometimes appearing as though he is right on the edge of remembering something. Everyone else around us looks as if something is on their minds as well, all of them deep in thought.

I must admit, there is something about this demon that... makes me feel as though I’ve seen it before. Not physically, of course, but in a picture or something.

“That’s right, could it be from that? Dr. Aristo Pyguri’s research paper.”

Zozo claps her hands together as she reminds us all of that paper.

Dr. Aristo...

He’s that guy who researches demons, right? He’d released the results of his research last year, if I remember correctly. The title had been...

“Lifeforms Full of Wickedness and Evil: Grotesque Beings Different from Magical Creatures.”

“The creatures we call ‘demons’ are true to their name—they are grotesque beings, existences that twist the very definition of what it means to be ‘alive.’ They are monsters that threaten our way of life and cause disasters that endanger our very civilization. They are, truly, ‘Creatures of the Devil.’ Thus, demons.

“Distinguishing them from magical creatures may seem difficult at first, but it becomes easier when one compares parameters such as lethality, physical traits,

and magical ability.

“Classifying demons themselves into different types, however, is a futile pursuit. The one thing we know about them is this: demons live by consuming those with magical ability. That is why they attack and eat both humans and magical creatures. They do not consume grass or anything else that is not touched by magic.

“The purpose of this research was to discover how, precisely, demons come into existence. To find the answer, I dissected the corpse of a demon.

“The results of that dissection would have shocked anyone: the demon I cut open had formerly been a human.

“It is not clear whether or not a sudden transformation had occurred to make a human into this demon. Upon first viewing the demon, I believed there to be no possibility that the creature had once been a human, given that the structure of its body was clearly that of a four-legged beast. It had sharp fangs and a green and sticky hide.

“But during the course of the autopsy, I observed that the internal organs and genitalia were those of a sort only seen in humans. In the judgment my team and I made, a male human had transformed to become the demon we were investigating.

“The bones were unmistakably those of a human. The thing seemed to have forcibly altered the bone structure of the original human to make itself walk on all four legs.

“We still do not know how this particular demon came to take on its grotesque form, but we do know this: it is no longer so strange an idea to think that the things we call ‘demons’ are actually creatures that we humans, wielders of magical powers, become.”

Along with the rest of his research, he’d included that picture of that disgusting shape of a demon. Well, it wasn’t so much a picture as much as it was a thoughtograph, but the idea was the same.

Even if we ignore the length of the tongue and the fact that the demon before us isn’t black, per se, we can’t deny that it is a perfect match with the demon

that Dr. Aristo had described. The Doctor hadn't discussed anything about the eyes in his paper, but in the picture, there had been three of them.

"I suppose it's the same as the one he dissected, then?"

Zozo's words startle me.

Once I begin thinking of the creature floating in the air before us as not a demon, but a "former human," it all becomes too scary, too quickly. *An existence no different from our own, suddenly and forcibly altered into that disgusting creature...* I imagine such a transformation happening right before my eyes. What I imagine is obscenely graphic enough to make me shudder at the thought of the reality of such a transformation.

Everyone around us lets out a sort of desperate laugh, as if to dismiss Zozo's suggestion, but on their faces are not expressions of mirth, but hard grimaces. *No one finds it easy to completely discount the possibility, it would seem.*

But, even if that is the case... if this demon is a "former human," who was it?

The identity of the formerly-human-demon that had been discovered by Dr. Aristo had never been determined. At the time of his research, it appeared that he had made efforts to discern who it had been by going through missing person reports, but with all the requests Harré received, and reports from other nearby countries, there were at least several hundred cases of missing persons each year, so there was no information to be had on that front. Conducting an investigation beyond the borders of our own kingdom is difficult in the best of times, and with a case like this, nothing of use seemed to have come up in their search.

"Let's get this on a thoughtograph for now."

Alkes transfers the demon's shape from the air to a piece of paper, then hands the paper to me. *I guess he wants me to include this picture on the request form.* We know nothing about it other than what it looks like, so I suppose it's important to include. I thank him, then show Zozo the paper. She gives him a look of admiration, smiling. "You've always been a rather *handy* man to have around, haven't you? Thanks for this," she says, putting one arm around my shoulders.

“Nanalie and I are going to head inside to write up the request form. Once we’ve gotten that done, we’ll have the client check the details so we can post it up on the notice board, but we’ll need to have the Director take a look at this as well, won’t we?”

“The Director?” I ask, confused. “Why would the Director need to see this?”

She steps away from me to go open Harré’s backdoor, then beckons for me to follow her inside.

“I haven’t told you yet, have I?” she says, then lifts her index finger up in the air. “Here at Harré, whenever we get a request that deals with... something that could pose a threat to the kingdom, like a demon, we have to let the King and the Knight’s Order know about it. I suppose you might call it an agreement that we have with them. We need to keep the information between us flowing freely, for peace.”

“Is that how it is?”

“Of course we get the client’s permission before we do that, you know? We can’t just go around spreading their personal information without asking them.”

“Oh, but if that’s the case, the Director’s going to be in a *very* bad mood.” Ms. Harris comes up from behind Zozo and lays a hand on her shoulder, looking at me all the while. Her curly brown hair hangs around her face freely, bouncing slightly with every movement she makes, giving her the appearance of being full of energy.

I look over at her in confusion. *I don’t understand. Why would the Director be angry?*

“Whenever we have to make that sort of report, we have to go directly to the castle. And then, you remember, the Knight Commander and the Director don’t have a good relationship, right?”

I have no idea why she looks so amused at the idea of the Director being in a bad mood. Her eyes are practically *sparkling* with anticipation behind her glasses.

Still, I must say that while I have seen the Director irritated whenever the Knight Commander is *mentioned* in front of her, I’ve never seen them in the

same room. *Perhaps it's even worse when they actually meet.* The Director might not stick to the advice she'd given to me, that I should throw salt at him like he's some monstrous bug. *It might go much farther than that.*

Right after that, we finally finish writing up the request form.

As an addendum to the form, we add some details about Mr. Gouda Klein's appearance. He has short dark brown hair and a bit of a beard; he's a large man; he was wearing overalls at the time of his disappearance; and so on and so forth—we write all the details we have about when he went missing.

We have Ms. Maria come back into Harré one more time before sunset to verify all the details of the request and have her sign off on it.

Right under “**MISSING PERSON!**” at the top of the request is written, “**Warning: Emergency Request Involving Demons.**” *The sorcerers will be chomping at the bit to get at this request. We might even find someone to take the request today, if we're lucky.*

Just as she'd said, Ms. Maria comes back around dusk. Once we tell her that there was a demon in the Eastern Woods, she seems both surprised... and satisfied with our explanation.

Satisfied?

“Ms. Maria,” I ask her, “did you, perhaps, know something?”

It doesn't look like it's very easy for her to talk about it. Her face is screwed up into a grimace as she says, “sorry,” and then begins to tell us the whole story.

“I didn't mention this the first time I came here, but the fact of the matter is that recently, the pokkels have been avoiding the fence bordering the Eastern Woods. The forest seemed to have become quieter and darker than before, and I'd spoken about this with my husband a number of times in recent days. But no harm had come to either the pokkels, ourselves, or the fence, so we decided to let the forest be the forest and ignore it for the time being. Then, when my husband first told me that a pokkel had run away, I hadn't understood how or why it would.”

She signs off on the forms. “I wonder... will someone actually find him...?” The

words slip from her mouth in a whisper. But then, not a second later, she says, “If I don’t believe he will be found, who will? I have to be hopeful.” She seems quite lonely in this moment.

Anyone else would feel the same in her situation, I think, furrowing my brow in concern.

If it were my own family, I’d be beside myself with worry. I wouldn’t be able to hold myself together for even a single day, let alone be strong enough to take care of a little child at the same time. It’s already been a day and a half since he went missing, and while I can see her smiling down at her daughter every time she asks for attention, I can tell she’s pushing herself quite hard to do so.

Isn’t there still an unsolved case involving a disappearance in the Northern Woods as well? Just thinking about that makes me even more uneasy.

“While I cannot simply tell you that ‘everything will be alright,’” Zozo says to her softly, “all of us are hoping for your husband to come back home safe and sound. All we can do is leave the rest to the sorcerers.” Zozo gives Ms. Maria an encouraging smile from her seat across the reception desk.

So that’s how it’s done.



“Will someone actually find her husband?”

After Ms. Maria has gone home, I am muttering to myself as I look over at the notice board with the request form that has “**MISSING PERSON!**” written across the top. Zozo’s next to me, so I suppose I’m not actually muttering “to myself,” and she answers my question anyway.

“This is just something we have to let the sorcerers take care of,” she says.

The rays of the setting sun come in through the windows of the building. Zozo and I, both watching the red light of the sunset, let out a sigh.

“Nanalie, you haven’t eaten yet, have you? I promised to treat you earlier, so let’s go out tonight.”

“Sure. ...Wait.”

My stomach growls.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, just that I realized that I have something else I absolutely need to take care of tonight, so I can’t go out with you, unfortunately.”

“Well that’s okay, I understand... but aren’t you starving?”

I have my secret rendezvous with the Duke tonight.

“I’m fine.”

I still have a bit of time before the bells for the Evening Star chime, but not enough to have a meal. *Well, actually I suppose I do have enough time, but I’d really rather prefer to eat my fill after I’ve gotten everything else done. I don’t want to turn down Zozo’s invitation, but in this case it can’t be helped.*

I remember that I haven’t taken a close look at the handkerchief the Duke had given me yet. He’d told me to “come here,” so that must mean he wrote the location on the cloth.

Carefully, so Zozo next to me can’t see, I slowly pull the handkerchief out of my belt pouch. Very quietly, I unfold the cloth to read what it says, and on it is written: “*the rear entrance to my mansion.*”

“There’s something I’d like to check,” I remember him saying, “I was just

about to ask someone else to do it.”

What had he meant by that? The whole way he had acted back then made it seem as though he had just thought of the idea. Whatever this ended up being, it was sure to be a load of trouble.

Even so, I am happy to be *asked* to do something, so while it certainly feels suspicious, I want to do whatever he needs, and do it perfectly.

But good grief, nothing good ever happens when he is involved, that’s for sure. (I’m just going to ignore the fact that I was the one who had barged in on his party.)

I don’t have time to eat, so I guess I’ll be going as I am now—hungry.

“Hey, Nanalie?”

“Yes?”

“The place that we teleported to today—that was Duke Rockmann’s residence, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was.”

“I’m so jealous of you! His son was in the same grade that you were, right? What a good friend to have.”

“No! You are completely mistaken! He is not my friend!”

“Wha—? Really?”

After we’d gone through that whole teleportation business, she hadn’t asked me anything about my mixup, simply telling me that “sometimes these things happen” before comforting and encouraging me despite my mistake.

She still seems to find it strange, however, that we ended up teleporting to a place like that. “For thoughts of him to have crossed your mind while you were concentrating that hard, I thought that you two must have quite a good relationship,” she says, looking over at me in confusion.

“You know, he and I are actually...”

I don’t have anything in particular to hide about my relationship with Rockmann, so I tell her everything. *If I tell her all the details, maybe she’ll have*

some advice to offer about my situation.

I tell her everything, about how offensive that term “second place” is to me, how *he* is my mortal foe, and all that happened when we were students.

“So that’s the kind of life you had back at school,” she says, nodding her head in understanding. She’d listened patiently and quietly the entire time.

Whenever I’d tried talking about this subject in the past with Nikeh, Benjamine, Maris, or any other of my friends, they’d just dismissed me with “Okay, whatever,” or “Anyway, getting back to Satanás,” or “I simply can’t bear to hear anymore!” Their refusals to take me seriously had several times sent me to bed sobbing my eyes out. Basically, they hadn’t cared about the issue at all. Benjamine had thought that I was trying to talk about “romance” every time that I brought *him* up, and had always changed the subject to be about Satanás. While I did enjoy her cute little love stories about the two of them, every time she ignored my very real problems to change the subject back to her crush, she was essentially asserting that what I had to say was less interesting than a story about Satanás tripping in the hallway.

Perhaps it’s because she’s the first person to ever listen to me talk like this, from beginning to end, but right now, Zozo appears to be as radiant and lovely as a goddess.

“Moral support” is truly necessary to make one’s way in this horrible world.

Starting today, I’ll be a devoted member of the Church of Zozo.

“So he’s just basically your friend, right?”

“NO!”

I’m leaving the Church.

Working at Harré, Part Three

“Ms. Zozo, I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but if it’s alright with you, I’m going to leave now.”

“No worries, I didn’t have plans for tonight after all. You did good work today. I’ll be the one who gives the report to Director Locktiss.”

Zozo’s letting me leave work a bit early today. I hadn’t asked her to do so, but I’d been happy to accept her offer when she’d made the suggestion. Once I’m outside, I head towards Duke Rockmann’s mansion with Lala.

“Gotten a little dark now, hasn’t it?”

“Lady Nanalie, please, ride on my back.”

“Thanks.”

I’m not going to use that magic circle. It’s not that I’m scared about failing again, but I can’t go around teleporting to places when I don’t know who, exactly, is at my destination. The Duke has asked me to come “in secret,” anyway, so instead of the teleportation spell, I cast the *Coat of Many Colors* over Lala and myself before we take off.

“Let’s fly west,” I say, and I feel butterflies fluttering in my stomach as we ascend further up into the cloudless sky. With the whole mess at the mansion that had happened earlier, I now know its general location.

Below the Royal Isle, on the west side.

Maris, I recall now, had gone on and on about how the Duke’s mansion was so “fancy” or “fabulous” back when we’d been in school together, but to be perfectly honest—no offense, Maris—I hadn’t the slightest fraction of a fragment of interest in what she’d been talking about, so it had been in one ear, out the other. It had all been information I hadn’t been interested in knowing, but when we’d exited the mansion to head back to Harré earlier today, I’d figured out, quite without meaning to, that the Isle floats to the east of the mansion grounds.

The mansion itself is huge. There's a fountain and a flower garden maze in the courtyard, and it sprawls over so much ground, you'd think it was a small castle. When I'd seen the whole place from the outside, my jaw had literally dropped as I stared at the top of the building.

My house, on the other hand, wouldn't even have filled up a fourth of the courtyard. *The Rockmann mansion is clearly different from those of the other aristocrats.* I hadn't taken a close look at any others, but from what I could catch a glimpse of as I flew overhead, they certainly weren't nearly as large. If several Rockmann mansions were built in the kingdom, there wouldn't be even the tiniest sliver of land left over for us normal people to live on.

I don't mean to be competitive about this, but surely his house doesn't need to be this big.

The distance from Harré to the mansion isn't that far. Walking it would take a long time, of course, but riding on a familiar as I am, we arrived relatively soon after departing.

"I hope it's alright to land here," I say, flying once around the perimeter of the grounds before landing in the rear gardens behind the mansion.

The rear gardens aren't directly behind the mansion itself, as an iron enclosure and then a wooden fence still separate us from the building. I can see the mansion from far off, but the sense of alienation I feel right now is almost indescribable. *Back home, the old lady who lives three houses away from us is still closer than I am now to the mansion proper. Just what kind of place is this?*

There aren't many people on the back side of the mansion; in fact, there's nothing at all here. If I walk a little further away from the building I can see some other small houses in the distance, but between us is a wide green expanse, broken only by a single small gray road that stretches across the horizon from north to south.

"Lady Nanalie, are you really going to do what he asks you to? He is Sir Rockmann's father, after all."

"...Well, yeah, I am going to. Normally, you enter a place like that without permission, and you'd expect a *massive* public scolding, but he dismissed my trespass with a smile and requested just one small favor, so I don't mind."

“But my lady, the palace ball? ‘Sneak in’? It is all too suspicious.”

“You think so?”

The Duke had told me to come here, so Lala and I are having a little chat while we wait. Coming here was simple enough, but I haven’t been told a single thing about what I’m being expected to do next, so I’m a bit lost. Furthermore, the “back of the mansion” was too vague a location for me to know if I’m in the right spot or not. *The bells for the Evening Star will be ringing at any moment, and he’s still not here.*

I lean against Lala, who’s standing next to me. I rub my face against her soft, warm pelt, letting out a little sigh of happiness as I close my eyes. *Don’t blame me if I fall asleep here on Lala after working all day.* The sun is almost completely set by now, and I only have one eye cracked open as I keep a lookout for the Duke.

“We dealt with the demon earlier today, so surely you are weary, my lady?”

Lala looks at me and licks my face.

“Nah, I’m fine. It wasn’t that big a deal, anyway. I’m more worried about the client, Ms. Maria.”

“...Yes, I suppose her situation is concerning.”

“I like the fact that I can just lay here against you, take a little nap on your back, and close my eyes, but I don’t think Ms. Maria’s been sleeping at all recently. There were some dark circles under her eyes.”

She’d seemed weary not just physically, but emotionally.

“The demon—”

“Hello there. My apologies for keeping you waiting.”

A man’s subdued voice interrupts our conversation.

Before us, someone has just lifted their own *Coat of Many Colors* spell to reveal himself as the man who I’d exchanged a promise with earlier, Duke Rockmann.

“Du—!”

I scramble off Lala's back and quickly stand to attention, giving him a bow in greeting. *How horrible for him to have seen me like that. I'll be thought of as not only "bad-mouthed," but also as some slovenly girl who thinks it's okay to just laze around other people's backyards! I absolutely cannot leave him with any worse of an impression than I already have.*

The Duke is wearing a tailcoat and holding an indigo staff, resting one end on the ground.

"I haven't been waiting at all," I say, shaking my head.

"All the better," he says, smiling. "Come with me." He leads me inside the gates to the mansion. I am surprised to see the fence disappear, then reappear behind us on the path to the mansion, but I force myself to remain calm and follow him.

The path leads straight to the mansion through the rear gardens. *Can't everyone see us walking here? Not sure there was any point in my "sneaking in." Just who does he not want to know that I am here, anyway?*

"Is this... alright?" I ask him.

"No one other than servants uses this entrance of the mansion, so we shan't be seen here."

So it's alright if the servants see me?

"Um, will we be going inside the mansion?"

I am being led to some doors leading into the mansion. "Please, after you," he says. I hesitate. *Just what is going to happen to me...?*

"Um, pardon the question, but when you said you 'wanted to check something,' to what, exactly, were you referring? What would you like me to do?"

I'm a little concerned as I wait for his reply.

"Yes, about that... Well, no one's here right now, so this'll do."

I enter the mansion and find myself in a room where the floor is covered with a thick red carpet. But there are no beds, bookshelves, or tables in the room. *Is that a large wardrobe?* Other than that one piece of furniture, I see a mirror of

about the same size hanging on the wall. It's all a bit bleak. There are also three ladies dressed in what look to be blue servants' uniforms. *You said no one was here, but right before us stand three ladies, Your Highness.*

What is this place? Do aristocrats spend their time in rooms like this? I can't say I fancy their taste in furnishings, or lack thereof.

"The truth of the matter is that I've been ordered by the King to see that my son Alois and Princess Corolla the Fourth from the Kingdom of Sheera are bound together in matrimony."

I stand there, stunned silent at the Duke's words. The Duke closes the doors leading outside and we continue speaking.

"Matrimony?" I ask. "Is that true?"

Marrying a princess?

Oh, is that so? A princess?

"...Huh? Ma-Matrimony?!"

Marriage?

Who's getting married? Him?

He's marrying a princess?!

"That *bastard*, I mean, Sir Alois, is, oh no, what about Maris?!"

Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaris! It's all over for Maris!

The boy Maris likes is getting married! No, don't cry, Maris!

"Maris? Ah, you refer to the lovely lady from Marquess Caromines' family. My son does seem to like her, but... we are a rather distant part of the royal family ourselves, so we cannot refuse an order like this from the King."

The word "Maris" is jostling around inside my head as I stand here listening to the Duke. *I couldn't give a fig about what happens to him, but Maris had been positively glowing with excitement at the idea of having Rockmann marry into her family! I've stood by her and seen how she adores him. This will come as quite a shock.*

Hold on a second. Did he just say, "distant part of the royal family?" What in

the world does that mean? Huh? What exactly does that mean?

As if he can guess my thoughts, he nods and says, “Oh, I am actually the younger brother of the current King.” He makes no further explanation of *that* bombshell.

The King’s... younger brother?

Brother, as in, they have the same parents?

So the King is basically Rockmann’s uncle, and Rockmann is the King’s nephew, and the King’s child, Prince Zenon, is Rockmann’s cousin?

Which means that Duke Rockmann is a former prince?

Is this what Maris had been alluding to when she told me that I “must speak politely” to the Rockmann family?

Well, I suppose it makes sense now why he gets along so well with Prince Zenon.

But still, isn’t this all too much, too quickly, for me to properly take in?

The only thing I’ve ever studied has been magic. We never learned anything about the aristocracy back at school, and the only things I’d learned in the course of my daily life were the names of the King and his children.

But for the Duke to be telling something like this to someone like me, surely Maris and the other aristocrats are already aware of this, right?

“Is this common knowledge among the aristocrats?”

“No,” the Duke replies, shaking his head. “Only a very small number of people know about this. You, young lady, are now yourself one of those people.”

It doesn’t seem as if the Caromines family is aware of this information.

Wait, why wouldn’t Maris know?!

Why would I and only a few others know when she doesn’t? The whole affair is a total mystery for me.

“My son has agreed to the marriage, and it would appear Princess Carolla finds it an agreeable prospect as well.”

The Duke completely ignores me and my wide-open mouth and continues speaking.

“I married my wife out of love, you see. Even now, we are quite happy together.”

So both of them agree on the marriage. But does Rockmann really have any feelings for her?

If Maris finds out, she'll go insane. I can just see it now: she discovers the truth, and from behind her rises a wall of flames to burn everything around her.

That reminds me—back in our fourth year at magic school, right before we went on vacation, hadn't there been rumors of him being busy “meeting with a princess of a neighboring country?” I'd shrugged it off as a ridiculous rumor at the time, but Doran does border three other kingdoms: Naraguru, Vestanu, and Sheera.

That “princess of a neighboring country” must have been referring to this “Princess Corolla.”

If they've been involved with each other for this long, I can't deny the possibility that they've been developing their love for each other in secret all the while.

“Perhaps it's because I chose my wife out of love, but I... I just find it difficult to discern what, exactly, my son is feeling about this marriage he so quickly agreed to. He has met with the Princess several times, of course, but it's all rather uncertain as to whether he's grown to like her or not.”

The Duke has a somewhat gloomy expression on his face as he speaks.

Duke, Your Highness, please, do try to be a little more excited about your own son's marriage.

“There is no end to the rumors about my son and his dalliances with other women, but in this case, I simply cannot rely on rumors. Should they be married, the Princess shall reside here in our mansion, and join our family.”

“Well, in that case... what do you want me to do?”

What is he trying to get at?

“The ball tonight is a masked ball. Princess Corolla shall be in attendance. I have made a certain *wager* with the King about tonight.”

“A wager?”

“I have consented to agree to this marriage full-heartedly if the two of them are able to find each other with masks on.”

A masked ball. I've heard a few stories about what they're like, but I can't picture what goes on at them. I'm sure that the “masked” part refers to people wearing masks to hide their faces, but why would someone go out of their way to have a ball, and then tell everyone to wear masks? Wouldn't it be nicer to see everyone's faces?

...There's no way that they're holding this ball for this one purpose, right?

King, Your Majesty, isn't that going a little too far? Isn't there some other way of figuring out their feelings for each other?

“The King has agreed to this wager, then?”

“The King thought up the match himself, believing he could unite the two kingdoms with this marriage. His eldest son Bill married Marquise Ludrique and gained control over her lands, and she herself is the second princess of the Naraguru royal family. That marriage was also carried out by royal decree, but they liked each other, so there was no issue at all. Once I pass away, I intend to leave the title of “Duke” to Bill. Alois will receive another Marquess title, a special one allowed to him alone by the King himself, and following his marriage, shall live on the lands granted to him by the title. The King has said that Alois can refuse the marriage if he likes, anyway.”

“...? Even though it is a royal decree?”

“The proposal came from *her* side, not ours. It's not something that Alois chose to do of his own accord. Tying together royal families from different kingdoms is, of course, an important endeavor, but even the King himself tells me that our personal, private desires as his subjects come first. Even after he was told all that, however, Alois didn't have so much as a second thought about the proposal and agreed to it without hesitation. I find that a little odd.”

“So... what do you want me to do?”

This is the third time that I've asked that question.

I'd really like an answer.

"I want you to join the ball, speak with my son, and discover his true feelings on the matter."

"...Excuse me?"

His son's true feelings?

Join the ball, and interrogate Rockmann to figure out if he likes the Princess or not?

I know it's rude of me to do so, especially to a duke, but I can't help but look at the man speaking to me with a scornful glare.

He's been speaking quite seriously to me all this time, so I'd rather not say this, but...

"Um, please excuse my rudeness, but I am *absolutely sure* that I will not be able to discover his 'true feelings' about the Princess."

"No, I think you're quite mistaken about that."

Huh? Where's all that confidence of his coming from?

"No, Your Highness, I'm telling you, it would be completely futile of me to ask him about this."

"I told you that you were the right person for this job, didn't I?"

"You know, I'd actually like to ask you *why* you think I could pull this off."

"A reasonable question. I suppose the answer is that 'you were able to get into this mansion.'"

What in the world does he mean by that?

And with those final words from the Duke, he calls over the three servants that have been standing in the corner of the room, and turns me over to them. He walks past me, gives me a light pat on the back, and says, "I'm counting on you." *Counting on me? For what?*

But it seems that he had been talking to the servants right then, because they

all immediately respond with “Yes, Master,” and each grab a different part of my body. By the hands on my shoulders, arms, and hips, I am dragged before the mirror hanging on the wall.

“Young lady, you are such a beauty.”

“Goodness me! Just look at your beautiful sky-blue hair.”

“How adorable you are indeed, Your Ladyship!”

“Wha—”

While all the servant ladies around me are showering me with compliments, I feel my clothes being pulled this way and that off my body.

The sudden sensation of being disrobed puts me on my guard, and I cling tight to the sleeves and hem of my uniform.

“I am not ‘Your Ladyship!’ What’re you trying to pull here?!”

No matter how I resist, my clothes are yanked off me piece by piece, until at some point I notice that even my shoes are missing.

I attempt to find the Duke to protest against this sudden turn of events, but he is nowhere to be found.

Just where did he go, that two-faced gentleman?

“His Highness has told us that we are to transform Your Ladyship into the most lovely woman at the ball tonight, so we are merely carrying out his wishes.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh my, shan’t you be attending the ball at the palace tonight?”

“Shan’t you be attending?”

At what point did I agree to all of this?

“But I am just a commoner, you know? Do you really think I can go to the ball so easily? Even if I were to say to the guards that I was there under orders from the King’s brother.”

“Oh no, the King *himself* is quite aware as well, I’m sure.”

“What?”

One of the servants, at that exact moment, casually lets that slip out the instant she strips me of my underwear.

I’m not about to start making a fuss about being undressed at this point. I’ve already gotten the feeling that it would be pointless to resist, anyway.

But if the King himself knows about this, it’s rather overwhelming to think that I’m actually a part of this scheme. *I’d very much prefer not to involve myself with the royal family. The possibility of me doing something to embarrass myself is that much higher.*

How and why am I in this situation?

I’d worked so hard to become a receptionist at Harré. If I have enough spare time to be doing something like *this*, I’d much rather be gathering more information for Ms. Maria to help find her husband as soon as possible.

“That’s why, Your Ladyship, there is no need to worry.”

I told you, don’t call me “Your Ladyship.”

As a result of the quick and careful handiwork of the three servant women moving around me, I am, entirely against my will, totally and utterly transformed.

Before I know it, I have been suddenly changed into a pure white dress by three of his—the Duke’s—subordinates, or should I say, servants, and I am now being made to ride in a carriage drawn by silver horses, flying directly for the Royal Isle. I haven’t been back here since graduation, and while six months isn’t that long, what with the situation I’m in and the white dress I’m wearing that’s as heavy as lead, I am excited to be coming back to the Isle. The Isle below us looks as pretty as ever, and while it looks nice whenever I ride here on Lala’s back, it somehow looks even more magical from the window of a flying horse-drawn carriage.

When the castle comes into view, however, my excitement instantly disappears, to be replaced by a heavier emotion. *This is depressing. I’m being punished, aren’t I? Please, make a right turn here, or tell me to jump out of the carriage into the sky, or anything else, really, to get me out of this situation,*

now. I wonder if this is what cattle feels like when it's being shipped around from place to place on those cargo wagons?

I lean my chin on my hands and let out a big sigh. The Duke looks over at me, sees my worried expression, and attempts to calm me down.

“There'll be no trouble if you enter the castle with me. They'll probably have a security check where they look at you and your magic type, but it'll be over in no time.”

He commands the horses to stop, and there, right in front of the palace's massive gates, the carriage comes to a stop.

Wow! They're just as large as I imagined. I'd been pressing my face up against the carriage windows until just a moment ago, but I hadn't been able to see the top of the white palace where Prince Zenon lived, concealed as it had been by the clouds. This is my first time seeing the castle up close, and I'm rather impressed. The dress and my heart both feel a good deal lighter at the sight. Thanks, palace. Those pure white walls aren't just for show, are they?

I wonder if Prince Zenon himself will be joining the dances at the ball tonight. Even if he is there, however, I can't simply go up and start chatting with him, third in line to the throne and all that he is as prince.

“Oh my, you're here too?”

“Tonight looks like it's going to be fun. I had this made especially for the ball, you know.”

“Gaze upon this great mask of mine, will you? Suits me well.”

We arrive in front of the castle, and the area is practically overflowing with people already wearing their masks. Among the people ascending the steps to the castle, I see some who have dyed their hair green or purple, possibly just for the ball tonight. Everyone's masks look different, with some transparent (*can those really be called masks?*), some with cat ears, some positively fluffy—adorned as they are with bird feathers—to others decorated with flowers, to yet even others covering only a single eye, all having unique shapes and colors.

Among those are masks so extreme, they might be better called “costumes.” Here and there, I can see that some have transformed their heads into those of

birds, pigs, and other animals, wearing not mere masks but full-on costumes.

Everyone seems to be avoiding getting near any of *those* individuals. *They took the whole “mask” thing a bit too far, no?*

But then again, everyone here looks weird. I’d prefer to be as far away from them as possible. To think that all of these people around me are aristocrats... It makes one rather concerned when considering the future of this country.

I use the mirror inside the carriage to check my appearance once again. *Maybe I look weird as well?*

I’ve pulled back my long, dark brown hair to make room for the golden butterfly mask that covers almost my entire face. My white dress is sparingly decorated with lace, and I am, of course, wearing high-heeled glass slippers.

It’s been a long time since my hair’s been this color. While that blue is a nice reminder of the time when I found out my magic type, I do feel most at ease going about in public with this dark brown instead.

Putting aside all that, there’s something I need to ask the Duke.

“Don’t you think that your son will find it rather suspicious to have some complete stranger come up to him and ask him all about his true feelings concerning the women in his life?”

“The masked ball is an event held for the very purpose of concealing one’s identity. You are *meant* to become someone else under the mask, and reveal your true self to your partner only by dancing with them.”

The Duke intends to use this facade of a masked ball for me to “find [his] son, and inquire as to whether he truly has any women close to his heart.” *No matter how you look at him, he’s clearly going overboard for his son. Completely overboard. He’s beside himself with worry about the romantic affairs of his son.*

Personally I wouldn’t mind if that questioning was all I had to do, but I have to find Rockmann in this crowd first. *Anyhow, just imagine it: some woman he doesn’t know sidles up to him and asks, “Is there someone you hold dear to your heart, my good sir?” He’s obviously just going to dodge the question with some halfhearted answer that reveals nothing.*

Well, I suppose that even if it isn't just "some woman," even if he knows it is me, I don't suppose he'd tell me how he truly feels, anyway.

My whole face is covered with a mask, and my hair is now dark brown. As long as I don't take my mask off, nobody is going to have any idea who I am. *I've thought this a million times already, but do I have to be the one doing this? Surely anyone could pull off this little scheme, right?*

Then there's the Duke, sitting next to me, wearing his mask.

Sir Duke, pardon me for saying so, but all you did was put on a very simple mask. It's just a little silver thing that barely covers the upper half of your face. The rest of you, clothes included, is absolutely unchanged. You might as well not be hiding anything. I can still see your beard!

Your mask is a joke. Just what do you think it's hiding? Are you even trying to hide anything? Take a look at those people going all out with their costumes, Duke, Your Highness, and try to learn a thing or two. Let's try being more like them.

As all this is going through my mind, the Duke takes my hand, and I am led down from the carriage.

"We have been expecting you, Duke Rockmann."

Upon hearing those words, all of the aristocrats around us instantly draw near the Duke, who's just come down from the carriage himself. *To think that they were able to discover his identity beneath that mask in just a few seconds! Can't really say that mask is doing its job, can you?*

"Sir Michael, is your lady wife already inside the palace?"

"Yes, she's quite close with the royal family, you know. She went flying off to the palace by herself before I could manage to get out the door."

"Lord Rockmann, fix thy gaze upon my magnificent mask. Is it not suitable? Suitable, yes?"

"Suitable indeed, Marquess Matarda."

However.

A large number of people have come over to speak to the Duke, likely out of

admiration for his person or because they idolize his status in the aristocracy. No one, of course, has the courtesy to remove their masks when speaking to him. Even some of those people with animal heads for “masks” have come over to speak to him. I’d doubted that he’d be able to differentiate all these people under their masks, but he speaks to them as if he knows the identity of each and every one of them. *Amazing, Duke. At this point, everyone simply looks like a demon to me.*

One of his admirers, a man, glances down at me and asks the Duke, “Who might this woman be?”

I have no idea how to answer his question, so I remain silent, but when the Duke says, “She’s a distant relative of my wife’s, the daughter of a count,” I nod along in affirmation. All within earshot seem persuaded by this explanation, and the Duke leads me forward and upward into the castle. His wife does seem to actually have a number of relatives with daughters my age, so all of the ladies and gentlemen walking around us continue to pelt us with questions, like “Did the young lady come alone today?” and “Are your parents doing well?” and so on and so forth. I, who have no idea as to the real answers to these questions, respond as vaguely as I can to a few, while the Duke answers the rest. Together, we somehow manage to fool them all.

I’m not the one who should be saying this, given the circumstances, but really, people, should you be so trusting of the Duke? Shouldn’t you find something rather suspicious about his responses? Why in the world do all of you just accept whatever he tells you?

It was nice that we had fooled them, but now Duke Rockmann seems like even more of a frightening person to me. *He’s clearly someone comfortable deceiving those around him with ease, as if he’s almost never been caught in a lie. Surely he hasn’t hypnotized them all, right? Maybe I myself have been hypnotized...?*

Just as a test, I quietly whisper the incantation for the spell that lifts hypnosis. *Nothing’s changed. Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?*

We enter the palace. Somewhere inside a band must be playing, because now I can hear music.

It's an entirely different atmosphere from that graduation party we had at school months ago. I feel like I am well and truly stepping onto a ballroom dance floor here. *It's not like the graduation party was a halfhearted attempt at an event, either; it just seems that here, now, I've trespassed into some terribly elite environment. It's not just the other people at the castle, but also the man next to me who gives me this feeling.*

"Your invitation, please. We also make a humble request that you show us your Certificate of Rank."

Before we enter the Great Hall-like part of the palace, we are made to go through a perfunctory security check. The main thing being "checked" here, however, is merely what people look like under their masks, magical or otherwise, so that the Knights serving as security guards for the event can have a good look at the faces of the attendees. *If they make me do that, though, everyone will see quite quickly that I am not the "daughter of some distant relative."*

The Knight who sees my real face, however, merely lets out an "oho" of admiration, gives me a bow, and lets me pass without a word.

...To think it's that easy to get into the Royal Ball!

From there, of course, we still have to show them our Certificates of Rank, but at some point the Duke must have made one up for me, because he says, all perfectly naturally, "Here's the young lady's certificate," to the Knight whom he offers a piece of paper. *Where did he pull that from?* I stare at him, completely silent, but all he does is give me a wink and a grin.

Like father, like son. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, that's for sure.

Now, finally, we arrive at the location of the main event: the Great Hall of the Royal Castle.

All the masks glitter and sparkle under the light of the chandeliers in the hall. On the walls are engravings of the Goddess and her angels, and on the ceiling, mirrors reflect back images of the dancers below them. I can see the top of the Duke's head next to me very clearly.

Now then, let's see, is your hair getting a little thin up top, my dear Duke...?

Well, what would you know, as far as I can see, you don't seem to be going bald quite yet. His hair looks a great deal fuller and healthier than my father's. He's still got enough hair to have visible cowlicks.

I feel a sort of jealousy. I'd like to take some of that hair and give it to my father.

Unexpectedly, I see the Duke himself look up, and our eyes meet in the reflection.

Shoot. He caught me looking.

"Ah-ahh, that's right, I was just wondering, Duke, where your lady wife might be?"

"You mean Leena? She got here a while ago. I'm sure she's having tea with Her Majesty the Queen right this very moment."

"With Her Majesty...?"

At this point, I can't even act starstruck anymore without it seeming tired.

"I've just remembered—young lady, perhaps it's a bit late to be asking this, but can you dance?"

"Well, I can do the waltz, more or less..."

I'm having a flashback to when Maris forced me to learn how to dance:

"You must fix your posture! AH! You sighed at me just now, didn't you?!"

"I'm tired!"

"You, who manage to be so fearfully diligent in your academic studies, shall not be permitted to complain in the slightest at a little dancing practice!"

I let out a nervous laugh as those memories from my school days spin through my mind. Memories of being slapped on my legs and back while being forced to dance, crying all the while. Fortunately, we'd only practiced inside my dorm room, so at least Rockmann hadn't had a chance to see me look pathetic.

"In that case," the Duke says, bringing me back to the present, "perhaps you should avoid dancing at first. The early dances involve some rather complicated step patterns, so I'd recommend not joining in."

It had seemed quite obvious to me that at a dance, one would dance. I had forgotten, of course, that the point of a ball wasn't exactly to *dance* so much as it was an excuse to socialize. I feel grateful to the Duke for reminding me of that.

Stop right there. Why do I, someone who aspired to be a receptionist lady, need to know more about balls and other events like this? Normal people don't need to know this sort of stuff, do they?

"I don't know what type of mask Alois is wearing, but take a good look around, would you?"

Both Rockmann and the foreign princess have apparently been informed of the pageantry they need to go through tonight of finding each other in the crowd, and have also been told to wear "as concealing a mask as possible" to make it difficult for them to identify, or so the Duke tells me.

And the Duke simply expects me to find Rockmann in this crowd, despite the fact that he is intentionally wearing an extremely deceptive mask? How does he expect me to pull this off?

A ball is, primarily, an event where men and women dance with one another. But there is also the element of matchmaking involved, whereby young men and women of the aristocracy have a chance to meet and assess each other as a potential partner in marriage. Maris had told me that the young ladies who made their social debuts at such events would go to great lengths to look their absolute best in the fanciest of dresses in order to find their future husbands.

Tonight's ball, then, for Rockmann and the Princess, at least, is the final stage for them in the matchmaking process—the last step of their courtship.

"There's a buffet set up over there—no chairs to sit down in, but if you're hungry, it wouldn't hurt to go over and grab a bite to eat."

A buffet!

In the direction that the Duke points, I see that there is indeed a wide variety of food arrayed on buffet tables. The instant I smell that sweet, sweet aroma of delicious food, I can think of nothing else. *I'd thought there to be no possibility of finding something to eat, but there it is, delicious, beautiful food! My*

stomach, calm and quiet until a moment ago, threatens to begin growling again. *Look at the colors of those desserts! And those glistening cuts of meat! The dishes over there are, without a doubt, the finest foods the kingdom has to offer. It's food being served inside the King's castle itself, after all!*

"Alright then, enjoy yourself," says the Duke as he watches me leave him for the food, and then turns away to join a nearby circle of aristocrats deep in discussion.

"Enjoy yourself." Seriously, as if I could do that in a place like this.

I'm a bit frightened at suddenly being left to my own devices, but my body is telling me that I *must* satisfy my hunger immediately, so I heed my gut instinct and proceed directly to the food tables at the edge of the hall.

In the vicinity of the food stand only two people, who appear to be chefs. Neither they nor anyone else nearby is wearing a mask, which means not a single aristocrat is eating this food. *Why not? It looks positively delicious, it'd be a shame not to have some!*

I take a plate, fill it with meat and vegetables, and begin gobbling it all down, bite by bite.

"Yum, this is fantastic."

The mask covering my face is a nuisance, but I'm rather dextrous as I manage to put the food in my mouth quickly and without making a mess.

Now then, I suppose I ought to find out where Rockmann's hiding, under his mask.

I lift my fork with one hand and slowly point it around the hall, from one end to the other.

I can't simply use whatever magic I want here, unfortunately. The Knights on guard duty seem like they would kick me out the front door without a second thought if I start casting something conspicuous. They don't seem to mind those people who've taken to transforming their heads or, like myself, those who are using magic to change their hair color, but I'm fairly certain it would be absolutely taboo for me to start flying around the room casting spells hither and thither as I searched for Rockmann.

I suppose the only thing to do is to try to find him based on his height. Within mere moments of beginning to search that way, however, I quickly realize that there are a lot of men here just as tall as Rockmann, and all seem to give off the totally wrong impression, like the one with a bird head, or the pigheaded gentleman.

As you'd expect, all of the men wearing more normal masks are receiving quite a bit more attention from the women... No surprise there. I'd be too scared to approach one of those animal-heads.

The Duke had told me to search for Rockmann. *How exactly am I...?*

"Sir Al, that's such a lovely mask you have on there."

"Yours matches you nicely as well."

"Let's enjoy tonight, shall we?"

"Why, it's my first time at a *ball*, so please, be gentle with me."

I've heard *that* voice before. It's not one I'm particularly fond of.

"Sir Al"?

"You look stunning even with a mask on."

This turned out to be easier than I'd expected.

He's been right behind me this whole time.

I whirl around to look, and there stands Rockmann, surrounded by several women. He's wearing a mask identical to the Duke's in almost every way except the color—the Duke's wearing a silver mask, and *his* is black. *It barely conceals just half of his face.*

His hair looks the same as it did earlier today, drawn back behind his head and bound together in a loose ponytail. *Rockmann's just being Rockmann, really—he looks the same, hitting on girls in the same way that he always does. All that's different is that meaningless little mask.*

Anyone would know that it's him from the way that he's acting.

"Ring ring! Hello, Mr. Duke, sir? Your son isn't acting at all like you told him to!"

Ladies continue to gather around the guy that is clearly Rockmann, Princess Carolla among them. The Duke showed me a portrait of the Princess just a few moments ago, so I'm able to pick her out of the crowd instantly. Her hair is the same gold as Rockmann's, and it's curled into ringlets. Her skin is so pale it looks as though it's never seen the sun. Her shoulders, dainty as can be, look small in their proximity to her large breasts. *Mine certainly aren't that plump.*

The instant I see her, I feel as though my posture corrects itself in reaction. *Must be just my imagination. No way that I'm trying to look good next to her. I'm not making myself look pretty at all, no siree.*

But hold on a second. Hadn't the Duke said, "if they find one another?"

If I'm remembering that correctly, then that means the two of them have already finalized their engagement. *That must have been the easiest game of "hide-and-seek" ever.* Even though they'd both apparently been told to wear masks that would make them difficult to find, in the end they'd both selected masks that made it quite obvious who they were. *It's all rather meaningless, no?*

Interpreted differently, however, the fact that they both chose such simple masks might mean that they actually like each other.

"Sir Alois, it has been too long."

"Maris, good to see you here too. How've you been?"

"Oh, very well, as you can clearly see."

That caramel-colored hair, that crimson dress. *I've seen those before.*

It's Miss Maris.

As always, she's inside the circle of girls surrounding Rockmann. I want to call out to her, and it's quite frustrating that I'm unable to in my current circumstances. *She's the number one person I want to tell about what's going on right now. She's also the number one closest girl standing next to Rockmann at the moment.*

Maris, standing right next to you is the woman who is trying to steal away the man you love!

“Sir Aristo, it’s been a while.”

“Rudel’s boy, is it not?”

“Yes sir, I’m Teddy.”

I, who have been looking over at Maris, trying in vain to reach her with my nonexistent telepathic skills, hear a name that piques my interest.

Huh? Did I just hear the name “Aristo?” That couldn’t be Doctor Aristo, could it?

“Your research—”

“Ah, my boy, about that—”

I clear my mind and listen carefully to the voices around me, searching for the source of that conversation. *There.* It’s coming from somewhere to my right.

I look in that direction with a sidelong gaze, whereupon I see a somewhat heavysset man with a white beard and green mask that covers only one eye speaking to a tall woman with brown hair, wearing an ash-gray dress. They’re both holding glasses of something in one hand as they speak to each other. It had been her voice that had said the name “Aristo,” so clearly she had been referring to the man speaking with her now.

I’ve seen Doctor Aristo before. He came to the school once as a special lecturer. It had been right after he’d published that paper regarding the formerly human demon, so during my sixth year. His plump belly had made an impression on me then, so unless he had lost a great deal of weight, enough to be unrecognizable, the man I am looking at is, without a doubt, Doctor Aristo, his belly sticking out just that much farther every time he takes a breath.

But why would the Doctor be at an event like this? I suppose he is part of the aristocracy, and a count at that, but still. Perhaps that is reason enough for him to be at this ball. He certainly has more reason to be here than I do.

While I’m focused on the two of them and their conversation, someone taps my shoulder.

What do you want? I’m a little busy now, get lost, would you? I turn to see that standing next to me is that gentleman (if you could call him that) who’s

used magic to make himself pigheaded. I blink, several times, until I feel my shoulders suddenly rise in alarmed disgust. *It's not every day that some pigheaded person touches your shoulders, fortunately.*

Oh, but wait, he's holding a plate, isn't he? Well then, he's just like me. Another eater.

"Yes?" I ask the fellow, wondering whatever might be the reason he tapped me. He hasn't tried speaking to me at all in the intervening moments, only stared at me with those round little pig eyes. His head looks exactly like the real animal. There's even soft peach fuzz on his cheeks.

For a while, neither of us move in the slightest, our eyes locked together. The entire time we are staring at each other, I can hear the beautiful sounds of the dance music, and the not-so-beautiful sounds of conversation between Rockmann and his hangers-on.

What in the world is this guy about? Just because he's got on a pig costume (mask?) doesn't mean that he gets to be silent the whole time. Surely he can still speak.

WAIT! Did he just take that last plate of bunny-bird I was about to have...?!

"Oh my dear Golden Butterfly," he says, "are you fond of this bunny-bird?"

I, who'd been lost in my selfish thoughts about food, suddenly realize that he's finally spoken to me. *He has a rather nice voice.*

The Pigheaded Gentleman points at the plate I'm holding.

"Dear Golden Butterfly?" Is he referring to me?

"Sir, Your Pigship, I am only just a receptionist at Harré... and still an apprentice, at that. My name is Nanalie Hel. I am neither golden, a butterfly, nor a noble."

Of course, I can't actually say those words out loud, but I do feel a little uncomfortable at him calling me his "dear butterfly."

"Pardon?"

"You have been eating bunny-bird, and *only* bunny-bird, for quite some time, so I thought you might be fond of it, that is all."

“Oh, well, yes. I like it. Quite a lot.”

“Just as I assumed. I rather like it as well; very delicious, isn’t it?”

While I had been wondering what *he* was about, he must have been wondering what *I* was about, gobbling up all the meat on the table. I’d been conspicuous enough for him to have the urge to speak to me.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever seen someone eat meat like that at a ball,” he says, “I was rather surprised.”

“Oh, really? Don’t people normally eat it? It’s so delicious, and the other food is mouthwatering as well. Be a shame not to eat it.”

The whole time that I’d been eating, smiling to myself in pleasure at the deliciousness of the bunny-bird meat, the two chefs had been offering me other dishes, other recommendations for me to feast on. I’d turned them down, of course. *Have I really been eating that much?*

I unconsciously glance down at my plate. The meat that had been there just moments ago has disappeared, and the instant I come to this realization, I feel the last mouthful of meat go down my throat as I swallow. *How did it all go so quickly?*

Perhaps I did eat too much.

Just as I have that thought, the atmosphere in the room becomes noticeably more lively.

I look round and round, trying to find the reason for all the commotion. The Pigheaded Gentleman informs me that the king is about to give his evening address.

“Quiet.”

At the very top of the white stairs leading up from the floor of the hall sits a golden throne. His Majesty, the King of Doran, rises from his throne to look down at us, his subjects. *So that’s Prince Zenon’s father.*

Prince Zenon had inherited the dark gloss of his hair, but the King also has a beard and stature suitable to that of a King. Over his black military garb he wears a red cape, looking as regal as the King of Kings himself. I’d been worried

about the kingdom's future with these masked aristocrats in control, but with people like the King and Prince Zenon in charge, perhaps there isn't actually that much to worry about.

"Tonight, whilst concealed as you all are, be free of the bonds and fetters of your rank and identity."

As the King's words echo around the room, the sound of the music, which had been only in the background until that point, suddenly swells to fill the room. A wide space is created at the center of the Great Hall's dance floor, and, one by one or two by two, couples of masked men and women step into the space and begin dancing.

As the Duke had said, the footwork is complex, and all done while holding the hands of your partner and maintaining eye contact. With a quick step to the right, a glide to the left, a shift backwards, a sudden jump and a twist from there, up into the air... they are dancing.

So people do actually dance like that.

Now then, back to what I was doing... I put a different dessert on my plate and begin to nibble on that while watching the dancers. The chef standing at the table next to mine offers me yet another dish once I've finished the dessert. *"Good chef, you are so kind. It is all absolutely delicious. Don't suppose I could take some home now, could I?"*

The Pigheaded Gentleman is still standing next to me. There's still food on his plate. *Is he not going to eat that?*

Anyway, enough about him... I turn back to look over at *him* and the Princess, both of whom are the real reasons why I'm here.

Alois Rockmann. Still hasn't taken his mask off, still surrounded by noble ladies. Should one of the ladies invite him to dance, another will cling to his arm. Maris, somehow, is undaunted by all the competition. *Perhaps they feel free to be as indiscreet as they like with their affection, covered by masks as they are. At any other time, I feel like Maris would be calling her own behavior "improper" or even "vulgar," but there she is, right next to him.*

The Princess is also close by. *Do the other ladies know that she's the Princess?*

How am I supposed to get close to him with that crowd?

According to the Duke, at the end of the last song—at the end of the last dance, in other words—their engagement would become official. The last dance seemed like something special for everyone, not just them, as if there were some unspoken rule that all lovers—married, engaged, or otherwise—danced together at the end.

If one wanted to be able to dance with their partner, however, they first needed to find them.

“Doctor Aristo—pardon me, Count Huey. It is good to see you. It is I, Fodeuri, under this mask.”

“Oho, well if it isn’t Marquess Fodeuri. Good sir, with a mask like that, I hadn’t the foggiest who you might’ve been.”

Right next to me, as I’m stuffing my mouth with one last big bite of dessert, Doctor Aristo, of all people, begins speaking to the Pigheaded Gentleman.

“Bu—geh?”

I almost spit out my dessert, but somehow manage to stop myself.

Wait just one moment, wait now, this is all happening too quickly. My attention’s being pulled every which way and I simply can’t miss any of it! Ugh. If only there were two of me, it’d be so much easier to listen to both of these conversations! ...I should learn a cloning spell sometime soon. It’d definitely be worth the effort.

“It’s a bit unusual to find you alone at an event like this.”

“Well with this mask, it’s all quite understandable, Count. Further, I have just been speaking with this woman here, so I’m not alone at all.”

I quickly place the plate back on the table, and just as I set it down, the Pigheaded Gentleman takes my hand in his own. *Would you kindly refrain from using me as cover for the fact that you are indubitably here alone? Coming alone to a dance isn’t that big of a deal anyway, don’t be shy. I’m here alone myself so I don’t mind.*

“With this lady, you say?”

Doctor Aristo sizes me up.

“Um, well...”

This is as good a chance as I’m ever going to get.

I casually slip my hand from the grasp of the Pigheaded Gentleman, turn back to properly face Doctor Aristo, and give him a small bow.

“Pardon me, sir, but would you happen to be the Doctor Aristo who conducts demon research?”

“Yes, I am he, despite how my appearance tonight may indicate otherwise.”

The way he laughs perfectly matches his look as a kindly, portly older gentleman.

Interested as I am in him and his work, I have given into the temptation to ignore Rockmann and his onlookers so that I can have a conversation with the Doctor.

“You admit your name freely, Doctor?”

“I had no intention of hiding who I am in the first place. This mask only covers one eye, after all. I’m sure anyone who sees me recognizes me. For me to play games about who I am would be a little strange, don’t you agree? You, however, my good lady—who are you meant to be tonight? Someone different than your usual self?”

“Um, yes, embarrassing as it is.”

“Well now, whatever am I to refer to you as? Marquess Fodeuri, in what manner do you call her?”

“She is my dear Golden Butterfly—or rather, she has allowed me to refer to her as such.”

“Then I shall call her the same.”

My nickname’s been decided, entirely without my input.

What is this elitist toying that they’re putting me through? It’s extremely embarrassing. I am very glad to be wearing a mask. I bet my face is beet red right now.

If we're using nicknames, how should I refer to the Pigheaded Gentleman to my left? Something short and sweet, embarrassingly so...

Perhaps I should just call him Fodeuri instead, since that's how he introduced himself...

Hold on. I can't spend the whole night devoting my attention to these two! I must admit, though, I'm so excited to be speaking to the Doctor that I feel like jumping for joy. I might even be able to pull off that complicated-looking dance.

"As for me, do call me 'Count Huey,' if you please."

As I am internally panicking at missing my chance to speak to Rockmann, Doctor Aristo, or should I say, Count Huey, adjusts his mask as he reintroduces himself, sticking his hand out.

The aristocrats have so many names, it's almost impossible to remember them all. I, blessed as I am with a good memory, don't find it too difficult, but I'm sure others struggle.

I stretch out my own hand to shake his, but what happens is not a handshake, but him taking my hand and kissing the back of it.

Nobles!

"I was just speaking with Marquess Fodeuri about some new research of mine. He's offered me his perspective on some particular issues I'm facing. He's generous enough to come by the lab after he gets off work every now and then."

So this Pigheaded Gentleman does research too?

After the Doctor lets go of my hand, I look, very closely, at the person next to him.

"Um, might you permit me to ask just one question?"

"What's on your mind?"

"It's about your theory that you published last year—do you think that there's a possibility that other humans have become demons as well?"

I can't say anything about the work I'm doing at Harré or about myself, really,

so I try to edge towards the subject without letting him infer too much about my identity. He's the person actually doing the research on demons, so he should be quite a bit more knowledgeable on the subject than all those other people who've only read his theories. *It must be fate that we met here. I'll ask him as much as I can without arousing suspicion.*

"Well that's the question now, isn't it? It would be absolute backbreaking work to go around capturing every demon in the kingdom, dissecting each and every body, to determine if there are others, and if so, how many. At the moment, I haven't taken a look at any other demons besides the one I discuss in the paper."

"Is that so..."

"Does Miss Golden Butterfly have an interest in these sorts of topics?"

"Well, yes. It's interesting to think about how demons are created, and further, if we do not uncover what kind of creatures they really are, we will never be able to develop the means to defeat them."

I catch myself, clap one hand over my mouth, and let out a sort of nervous giggle.

Perhaps it's not such a good idea to pretend to be a noblewoman with such a deep interest in this subject. Still, I think I'm pulling off this charade rather convincingly, papier-mâché aristocrat that I am.

Even so, I shouldn't be asking him these sorts of questions. He'll doubt my identity as a noble.

"If that's the case," he says, "why don't you come around my mansion sometime soon to discuss the issue further?"

All my worrying is for naught. *I have completely convinced this guy that I am one of the nobles. I'm better at acting than I thought.*

"Not many people find my research the topic of polite discussion, you know. I'm actually criticized for it rather frequently."

"Why would that be? It's thanks to you and your helpful research on the demons that we know more about them."

“Some people share your point of view,” the Pigheaded Gentleman says, placing his plate on the table and taking up a glass in one hand. “But an equal number of people would disagree with that statement.”

“I knew what I was getting into when I began this research, so you won’t find me complaining about the opinions of others. As long as there are individuals like you, Miss Butterfly, that is enough for me. I’m always in the lab inside the mansion, so please, do visit me whenever it is convenient for you. I shall see to it that the guards shall happily open the gates for any woman who introduces herself as ‘Miss Golden Butterfly.’”

The Doctor smiles and pats his belly as he says so. He goes on to inform me of the location of his mansion, the name of his gardener, and all manner of details necessary for me to find him.

Count, surely this isn’t the time to be laughing? Why would you be sharing all of this information with some masked little girl, whose identity you know nothing about? I’m quite happy to take you up on the invite, even though you may be offering out of mere politeness, but surely it would do you some good to be a little more guarded about where you live? Duke Rockmann was just the same. I fear that someday, somehow, the two of you will be deceived by someone with intentions not nearly as innocent as my own.

As I am lost in my thoughts, I realize that I have completely forgotten the reason why I am here.

While we’ve been standing here, discussing demons (of all things), the music has turned into a series of light, cheerful, relaxed songs being played in the background.

“...Oh no!”

I suddenly recall tonight’s mission.

“My dear Butterfly, what is the matter?”

The matter is that I’ve lost it, completely. Perhaps I am just as much of an idiot as Rockmann always said I was.

“How long until the ball is over?”

“I believe it’s planned to last until—”

“Ladies and gentlemen, this next song will be the final waltz of the night. Please find a partner worthy of making a memory with on this fine evening.”

The last dance!

I can’t just stand here and continue watching Rockmann from the sidelines.

All of the other aristocrats around me are finding their partners.

Count Huey looks around with a small smile at all the commotion. “I’m too old for this, myself.” I see that a little ways away from us, two attendees who have come as husband and wife reunite in the crowd, link arms, and walk out onto the dance floor.

Now, what about those other two...?

“My dear Butterfly, if it pleases you, would you allow me this dance?”

I’m holding my mask on my face as I spin left to right, looking for Rockmann in the crowd. The Pigheaded Gentleman next to me breaks into a small bow and stretches out his hand.

“Huh? Oh... with you, sir?”

Count Huey and the Pigheaded Gentleman make eye contact.

“If dancing with one like myself would be displeasing to my lady, please refuse my offer without hesitation. I shall be the gentleman and abandon my pursuit of you at once.”

“No, it’s not, displeasing, at all.”

He has the face of a pig, but in his manner he’s like a prince. I suppose that might be insulting to say out loud, however.

Even besides the fact that he is, in actual fact, pigheaded, I am tempted by his offer to dance. *I can waltz well enough, can’t I?*

I’m not going to go around shouting “I CAN DANCE!” from the rooftops, though.

Still, I had come to the ball tonight prepared to dance with Rockmann, and now I’m panicking about the night ending without my having achieved that. /

don't suppose I have the right to be upset about the situation. I spent all that time casually chatting with the Doctor about something completely unrelated, after all. Might as well go on ignoring my mission, for now, anyway.

"In that case, shall we make our way to the dance floor?"

The Pigheaded Gentleman seems to have understood my halfhearted, vague reply to his invitation as consent enough for him to gently take my hand and slowly lead me towards the center of the dance floor. I look around for Rockmann and his partner as we make our way through the crowd. The Doctor, I realize, is giving us a little wave. I hear him say, "Oh, to be young again," as we leave him behind at the tables. I look away from him, and there, just a little to my left, I see the two of *them* together.

They have chosen each other as their partners for the last dance, as expected. Princess Carolla chose Rockmann; Rockmann chose Princess Carolla; they have chosen each other. *Well, at least they seem happy.*

As I am watching the two of them, the music quietly begins to play. Paired as I am with the Pigheaded Gentleman, in time with the music, I take my first step of the dance.

They've basically locked up their engagement now, haven't they? I look at the two of them through my mask.

No, not "basically"—they are now engaged, under the terms Duke Rockmann described to me.

I wonder if perhaps I've failed the Duke by not speaking to Rockmann. *But he should be able to rest easy now, knowing that they chose each other for the last dance, right?* In the end, I hadn't spoken to him at all. *This is the path he chose, however, so what happens beyond tonight is entirely up to him.*

Oh, look at that. The two of them are smiling at each other. "Well, whaddaya know, they seem fine together after all."

"To whom do you refer?"

I'd accidentally said that part out loud, distracted as I was by the happy couple in the distance. My dance partner, the Pigheaded Gentleman, is tilting his head to one side in puzzlement at my remark.

“There’s this certain person who seems like they’re going to get engaged soon, but their parents were worried about the whole thing, apparently.”

“Is that so?”

“But now I can see that they didn’t need to worry at all.”

There was absolutely no point to my coming to this ball in the first place.

If I’ve gained anything from tonight, it’s the fact that I made an acquaintance of Doctor Aristo.

———Squish.

“Hm?”

“So-sorry, I’m not good at dancing... Is your foot alright?!”

“It neither hurts or itches, so don’t worry about it. When it comes to dancing, it’s more important to enjoy oneself rather than try to do it all correctly. That applies to most things in life, I think.”

I had gone and stepped quite firmly on his foot. *What was I thinking, that I could dance a waltz? I shouldn’t be going around accepting invitations left and right when I am totally not suited to the occasion, whether they’re invitations to go to a ball or to dance with a noble. I feel like I’ve learned that today, that’s for sure.*

What the Pigheaded Gentleman is thinking at this, I have no idea, as he remains expressionless while I am panicking for having stepped on him. *I feel like he’s laughing at me under that mask, just a little. Not being mean about it, of course, but the idea is enough to make me embarrassed.* He’d laughed at me, or rather hadn’t, but the idea that he might have is enough to make me focus on the dance so I don’t mess up again.

Right now, what I need to show him is not “getting back up after I’ve fallen down”—I need to prove to him that I can fall, fly back up into the sky, and do three mid-air somersaults before making a magnificent landing.

“Brethren, hear me! Now is the time to reveal yourselves. Expose the faces under your masks, and let us behold this evening’s waltz in a new light, shall we?”

I am spinning in the Pigheaded Gentleman's arms as I hear the King's voice reverberate throughout the hall. From every corner of the dance floor I hear murmurs of discontent at the King's command. Without grasping what, exactly, is going on, I see the King looking down at us from somewhere far above.

Then—*is that powder?*— something begins to fall from the ceiling. The small particles, bits of light, flutter down to shower on the dancers. Some land on my hair and arms.

What's this stuff? What's going on? I look around for my answer, and realize there's something different about the people around me.

All of those people who had been wearing masks are now free of them, their natural faces exposed for all to see. I see not one purple-or green-haired head in the crowd, nor do I see a bird head or any other odd animal costumes like I had spotted earlier.

Beyond all that, however, I realize that the mask I had been wearing had been obstructing my vision, because now everything appears to be much lighter and sharper than it had been before. The weight of the mask on my face had finally disappeared.

My hair, stretching down to my shoulders, is once again blue.

"So who is it?"

"Pardon?"

"The person you've been talking about, the one who's going to get engaged soon?"

I know that voice. I completely freeze, still looking away from my dance partner.

But that's impossible. That voice could only come from him, over there...

Huh?

Princess Carolla has lost her mask, and, no surprise, she is who she appeared to be, but the man who she had been dancing with—who I'd believed to be Rockmann—is someone that I've never seen before. His light brown hair, and his somewhat shorter stature, mark him as someone quite different from the

Rockmann I know. Princess Carolla has one hand over her mouth as she stares at her dance partner, aghast.

Were those light particles...breaking the spell?

The masks weren't magical, though—why would they disappear with the other spellwork in the room?

But most important of all, the guy I've been dancing with...

Ever so slowly, I turn my head sideways to face my dance partner.

Before my eyes is a young man wearing glasses, his golden hair loose and unstyled as it stretches down to his shoulders, gawking at me with a stupid look on his face.

This is the first time that I've ever seen him with glasses on, so at first I think he's someone else, but this guy is, no matter how unbelievable it may be, the guy that I'd been watching this whole time, the guy who I couldn't possibly have just been dancing with.

There's nothing in his facial features that would make me think of a "pig," that's for sure.

I look over once more at Princess Carolla, and then back at the person in front of me.

"Huh?"

"Ah, I know what you're wondering—that guy over there was wearing my whole body as a costume."

"Huh?!"

My voice sounds strange.

"It's not so bad to be a pig every once in a while. I'm actually rather skilled at shapeshifting, but I rarely get the chance to use it. I was worried that the ladies would ignore me even if I tried to talk to them, but I guess I had some fun at the masked ball after all."

He adjusts his glasses with his middle finger, taps me twice on the head with his hand, and rubs my hair a little, as if it is entirely natural for him to do so.

I smack that hand away without a moment's hesitation. *To have my head rubbed by this bastard! It's completely humiliating! Worse, it's insulting!*

Right after I smack his hand, he comes back and lightly, or actually, firmly, whacks the side of my head. *Ouch. That hurt, you know?*

"Wh-Why?" I whisper to myself.

Marquess Fodeuri?

Pigheaded Gentleman?

What the hell was that whole charade about?!

"Why're YOU here?!" I ask him, flabbergasted.

"Why am I here?" he says. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

You—you're Alois freakin' Rockmann!

Look at him, the bastard, with his shiny blond hair, shiny eyes, shiny skin, standing there, shining. The nerve.

"Who's—who's 'Marquess Fodeuri'?"

"I am Marquess Fodeuri. I haven't lied to you tonight."

Is this guy for real? Hold on—if he's Rockmann, and he danced with me, what about his engagement with Princess Carolla?

"But enough about me... This is the second time today I'm asking you, but what're you doing here, in a place like this?" He pauses, looking closely at me. "Clumsy idiot that you are, you still manage to cause me quite a bit of trouble, don't you?" He takes the cloak that he's wearing on his back and throws it over me, covering my head and shoulders. And, following that, I can no longer see anything at all.

Hey— Hold on!

"Ngh— Sto— What're you—"

He called me an "idiot" again. Infuriating.

"I'm sure this has something to do with my father, but before you get all worked up—have you forgotten that there are people here tonight that know

what you look like?”

“Hmmm?”

He grabs the back of my head as I try to get out from under him and shoves my face into his chest.

I'm being crushed. My face is being crushed. This bastard intends to kill me by crushing my skull right into his own body.

“Maris is here, yeah? There would be quite a commotion if the other aristocrats found out a commoner like you was here.”

Oh, is that so? Is that your reason for crushing my face? I'm sorry, I should never have doubted you.

No matter how uncomfortable my current predicament may be, I can't run away right now. I can't expose who I really am to this world.

And, based on what I can hear from beyond Rockmann's cloak, it sounds very much like the ladies who had been dancing with the false Rockmann have realized their mistake, and, spotting the true Rockmann standing next to me, are dashing over to us, their high heels pounding against the hard dance floor.

“Goodness, Sir Alois!”

“How cruel of you to fool us!”

That's right, now's my chance—

“I know now's not the best time for this, but lend me your ear for a sec,” Rockmann mumbles down to me through the cloak.

I twist my face, still being shoved against his chest, to look up toward the source of his voice, and there is a space where I can catch a glimpse of his face between the edge of his cloak and the collar.

“What? Just letting you know, but I can't exactly ‘lend you my ear’ right now, physically speaking.”

From what little I can see of his face, close as it is, I can see him rolling his eyes in irritation at my insistence on technicalities.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” I whisper, refraining from agitating him further.

Now's my chance—time to complete the mission.

“Do you like the Princess?”

In a very, very quiet voice, I ask my question. He hears it—I think. I glance up at the sliver of his face I can see through the gap.

“And to think I was seriously wondering what you were going to ask me,” he says quietly, sighing slightly.

“So, so... what's your answer?”

I'd very much like for him to answer me quickly, so I can hop right out from his arms, retreat from the Great Hall, and head back home immediately. I'll have to cover my blue hair with a paper napkin the whole time to prevent people from recognizing me, but it'll do.

“Here's my answer,” he whispers back, his tone shifting a little bit as if he is telling me some great secret.



“Articles Three and Ten of the Magical Labor Laws of the Kingdom of Doran, followed by Articles Thirty and Thirty-One of the Aristocratic Code.”

“...Excuse me?”

“You aren’t familiar with them?”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

“No, it’s what you’re asking, I can promise you that.”

“Is that so. I suppose I still have a lot left to learn.”

I feel my hands twitch into fists, ready to punch him, but I hold myself back. *I’m gonna freeze this bastard back to the Ice Age! What a prick! Not only did he completely dodge the question, now he’s laughing at me.*

I’m sorry Duke, I’ve learned absolutely nothing of use!

“Sir Alois! Whyever!”

While I am silently fuming at Rockmann’s latest bout of idiocy, I sense that Princess Carolla has approached Rockmann and me.

Rockmann slowly draws his cloak tighter around me and turns away from the gap through which I can see him. He doesn’t seem troubled in the slightest. From somewhere in the back of my mind, I wonder, *Don’t you think you should be panicking a little? You’ve been caught in—well, not a lie, but you’ve certainly led this girl on.*

“Yo, Carolla. Looking pretty today, as always.”

“‘Pretty’! Who cares about that?! Why are you—”

Rockmann interrupts her. “Who does your heart belong to?”

Wrapped up in his cloak as I am, I can’t see what’s going on, but in Rockmann’s words, I can tell that something odd is happening around us.

I can’t hear the voices of any other aristocrats, but I suppose they must be watching the interaction between these two right now.

“It’s not me, is it?” His arm, holding me against him, tenses up ever so slightly as he says this.

“Wh-What are you saying? My heart belongs to you, Alois.”

“Wrong. If we keep going on like this, we’ll end up somewhere we can never return from. Before it gets to that, I need you to reject me, here and now.”

This isn’t a lovers’ quarrel... right?

What is it, then? Are they arguing over whether Princess Carolla ever felt anything for Rockmann? If she didn’t like him, why would the Princess be trying to marry him?

“Just try telling your father straight,” he said. “Your father isn’t the type of king who’d ignore a request from his darling daughter out of hand.”

“I, I...”

“I love seeing you smiling next to the man you love.”

Now all I can hear is Princess Carolla sobbing.

The ladykiller who went around making girls cry has finally brought the princess of another country to tears. And I’m here to witness it.

I don’t feel happy at all to be here. Furthermore, it’s getting rather hot under this cloak here, so I’d really like to get out from under his arms sometime soon. Not that I’ll be able to, but still.

“You’re...you’re right. I’m such a fool.”

“Go on, then. I’ll take care of the situation from here, somehow, so you can just go on back home.”

He says this all with the softest tone of voice, as if he is gently comforting a small child.

“...Yes, I will. But, you know, Alois, I...I liked you enough that I wouldn’t have minded spending the rest of my life together with you in marriage. It doesn’t seem like you felt the same, however.”

“If I were to marry someone, I’d want someone just as beautiful and intelligent as you, Carolla. But I’ve always wanted to marry the love of my life, so I can’t allow myself to enter into that sort of arrangement.”

He’s talking like love and marriage are two entirely different things.

So I guess that means these two aren't in love?

After those last words from Rockmann, I no longer hear Princess Carolla's voice. Instead, I hear something like the sound of someone nearby running away in high heels.

"What was that about?"

I whispered that very quietly, but Rockmann's sharp ears catch my words and he answers my question.

"Her heart belongs to another man. That's all."

"Well, then that means your heart must be completely broken, right?"

"Even if it was, I'd wonder why you'd think it was okay to come out and ask me that right now."

"Oh, sorry."

I really have no idea what goes through this guy's head. Had he liked her or not? He'd acted in ways that seemed to be considerate of her and her feelings, but some of what he'd done was strange, if in fact he'd had feelings for her.

Before I end up asking him something impolite again, like, "To what degree, exactly, is your heart broken right now," I decide to change the subject.

"...Um, just, by the way, but I kinda want to go home, so... what should I do?"

I've changed the subject, or rather, moved on from topics I'm too busy to worry myself with, like other people's love lives. Well, I suppose I'm not so busy that I couldn't worry about them, but I would much rather think about other things, if I've got the time to do so.

I want to escape from this pitch-blackness all around me, take a deep breath of fresh air, take off from the King's Isle, and get home as quickly as I can. Now that I've completed the mission given to me by the Duke, this next mission is one I'm giving myself.

"I can't use magic, and Maris is around," I said.

"You can't stay hiding in my arms forever, after all. What should we do?"

Even if I don't make a report to the Duke myself, I'm sure Rockmann will say

something to him, and in any case, I had done what he'd asked me to do: Princess Carolla likes someone else, but hasn't been honest about it to Rockmann, and so before it got to the point of a formal engagement, I'd forced them to confront each other about the issue and call off the engagement. She would go back home to her country, while Rockmann would stay here. The Duke would understand that this was the decision both of them had made.

"That's right—I asked you this earlier, but why are you here?"

"...Secret investigation."

"Oh, I get it—my father told you to discover my true feelings about Carolla, didn't he?"

If you know why I'm here, don't ask!

"How did you know that?"

"You came to the palace tonight with my father, didn't you? Also, you asked me a question about a topic that normally you'd have no interest in, right? And that was only after you found out who I was."

He did have a point that it *had* been rather odd of me to ask him, of all people, a question about his love life. No matter what our relationship was, friendly or otherwise, I think we liked to believe that we knew each other well. I hadn't, however, known or ever expressed any interest in knowing about his ideas on romance or feelings for Carolla, so he must have sensed I felt odd asking him about it, and figured that I wasn't asking because I wanted to know, I was asking on behalf of someone else.

Then, of course, the Duke had worn that "mask" that barely covered up half of his face, so even people who hadn't been paying close attention to our arrival at the ball would have noted that the Duke was accompanied by an unfamiliar woman tonight.

So he'd doubted me from the very beginning, hadn't he?

"I'd thought my disguise was perfect," I mumble, irritated.

"If you want a perfect disguise," he says, "don't look so beautiful next time."

"Huh?"

Don't look so beautiful?

Why can't I put on a costume to look beautiful? Or is he perhaps trying to say in a roundabout fashion that I am beautiful even without a costume? Which is it?

"I don't understand what you're trying to say," I reply, uncertain as to how I should express my confusion. *I can't very well come out and ask him, "Do you think I'm beautiful?"*

"You see, this is just another example of a time when you... Ah, forget it." Rockmann stops speaking halfway through, clearly exasperated at my response.

Why's he acting like this with me? I'm not an idiot for misunderstanding something right now, I hope.

"Ahh," Rockmann sighs, "just when I think I've found a good woman for me, this happens."

"What happens?"

"Anything that can go wrong, does go wrong. I've never had much luck in love, is what it means."

I tilt my head yet further sideways in confusion. *Now he's lost me again.*

"Sir Alois, whatever might you be doing?"

In the midst of our muttered conversation, a woman calls out to us—or rather, calls out to Rockmann. I suddenly remember that I haven't, in fact, left the ball room and this whole mess of a situation I'm in quite yet.

"What was that about? The commotion, earlier," she goes on.

"That lady was Princess Carolla, no? Was there something the matter with her?"

I can't move. The second I move, this whole charade will fall apart.

"Sir Alois, who might be that woman under your cloak?"

That's Maris speaking. My heart is pounding at the tone of suspicion in her words. It's frustrating. I want her to know I'm here, but at the same time, I really can't allow her to. I feel as though I'm about to scream in annoyance at

this whole affair. *That's it! There's nothing to it except to resort to this!*

"Cough, cough... COUGH."

"Oh my?"

Special attack! The Sickness Strategy.

"CoUgHHH, cOugh."

I groan in fake pain.

I try to make it sound like I feel terrible... *Well, actually I do feel terrible. Why don't I make it sound how I really feel? After all, my thumb is being jammed into my throat at this very instant, all so I can sound more convincingly ill.*

I, Nanalie, declare myself to be no longer an Ice-type mage, but a Drama-type.

Rockmann, hurry up and figure out what I'm trying to pull off here. I shoot a cough in his direction to get his attention. Rockmann slightly, ever so slightly, shifts a bit in reaction to my cough. Or perhaps not. I may have imagined it.

"Sir Alois? I don't suppose you've had an amusing little dalliance with that lady there?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. This woman here simply doesn't feel well. She's in such a bad way, in fact, that I can't even show you her face. There's simply no point in showing you a woman in such a hideous state, snot dripping from her nose, gripped in a cold sweat—not something you want to see at all."

Hey now. Watch it, bud.

"Dearest me! Is that so?"

"Why in that case, I suppose the best thing would be to take her home as soon as possible."

Just how awful of a woman does he want them to think I am? I'm glad that he figured out what I'm trying to do, but still, I don't like what he's saying. It's like that time when I was told that I got 100 percent correct on an exam, only to be told later that there were actually 101 points available, so I hadn't actually managed to get a perfect score.

Miss Maris and the other women seem to have accepted this explanation of

the state of affairs. “You can exit the hall out that way,” I hear one of them say, and we begin moving.

“Thanks,” Rockmann says, all relaxed. I want to give him a piece of my mind for being so relaxed at a moment like this, but he *is* covering up for me, so I can’t exactly complain about his behavior.

I must say, however, that for all the disguises to be completely removed in the way that they were—the whole idea of a “masked ball” was rather pointless, wasn’t it?

“Once we leave the palace, you’re going to leave the island on your familiar. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. Oh, wait—what was that nonsense about the ‘Magical Labor Law’ or something?”

“Quiet. Every time I talk to you, I feel like I’m losing another piece of my mind.”

My long day, short as it had seemed, ended with this conversation with *him* in front of the palace gates.

In the midst of all my other problems that I need to take care of, Rockmann had given me this new, strange riddle to think about, and he didn’t seem to want to help me figure it out. I frown as I begin summoning Lala. *An irritating bastard to the end.*

As if he wants absolutely nothing more to do with me, Rockmann walks briskly back into the palace after our conversation, without so much as turning around to look back at me even once.

“Ugh, that Fire Fool is so dumb.”

There isn’t a single Knight outside the palace.

Even with the barrier at the edge of the forest, is it really alright for them to be this unguarded against demons?

With that thought on my mind, I get on Lala’s back and we take off, flying back down to the land below the Isle.

(Continued in the next volume.)

Side Story: A Scene From Class on a Certain Day, Year Four

Another day begins, and with it comes another necessary lesson in magic.

“Now then, for today’s lesson, I’ll be teaching you about psychomagic.”

Professor Bordon claps his hands together as he stands at the podium.

Outside, all I can see, unfortunately, is rain. While I can hear the faint, quiet sounds of the gentle drizzle coming down from the gray skies covering the Isle, inside the classroom it’s as bright as always, the lanterns hanging from above casting us all in an artificial light at odds with the world outside.

Sitting next to the window, I occasionally look out at the rain as I tap my fingers on the cover of my textbook. My hair feels as though it’s absorbing the humidity in the air, and I can feel the slight moisture in it as I run my fingers through a few strands.

“The spell we’ll be learning about today doesn’t have an entry in your textbooks, so we’re just going to be taking some notes before I have you launch into practicing the magic yourselves.”

The professor makes a show of shutting the textbook he’s holding with a *snap*. He’s our homeroom teacher, so we’re used to his theatricality. I stop tapping my textbook and glance up at him. One of the noble boys sitting towards the front raises his hand to ask a question.

“What is ‘psychomagic’?”

Psychomagic. I think I’ve seen a book with that title in the library, on the shelf with the psychology books. I think I might have even read it already.

On the psychology shelf, there had been many books that discussed how the psychology of the caster could affect the spell, rather than how a spell could affect the target’s psychology. The books almost had that tone of a moralizing treatise, preaching on about how the emotional state of the caster could

drastically change the outcome of the spell, how that emotional variance was accounted for in the structure of spellwork, and emphasizing the importance of keeping one's physical, mental, and emotional state in a stable balance whenever one used magic.

I'd spent a lot of time in the library studying. At some point, I'd decided to read every single book in there, and I'm currently in the process of working my way through all the shelves one by one. The library is quite large, and while I've read a considerable number of the books, it seems like it's going to take all the way until the end of my sixth year to finish them all. I'd mastered the psychology shelf in my third year, and I seem to recall there being a book called "Concerning Psychomagic."

"Psychomagic is about discerning someone else's deep thoughts or feelings. Essentially, it's a spell that allows you to figure out their true intentions. You can't use this spell without a mirror, however."

"A mirror?"

"You turn the mirror to face the person you want to cast the spell on, so that their face appears in the reflection. If you've successfully cast the spell, you will be able to force out the honest answer to any question you might ask of the castee—only, it will be the reflection that talks."

"So what you're saying is that my reflection is going to talk to the caster, no matter what I do?"

"What?! I don't want to do this."

"It sounds awful!"

All of them sound distinctly unenthusiastic about practicing this spell. Some of them are flat out refusing to do so.

Well, figures, doesn't it? With a spell like that, "they" will be forced to answer questions they'd rather not, and in the hands of someone with ill intent, it could end quite badly.

But this spell, could it...?

"What are you all clapping your traps about? This spell isn't that simple to

cast. There're some who take two, three, even ten years before they can pull it off."

So that's why he doesn't seem particularly concerned about having a bunch of students practice this spell.

Psychomagic is an extremely sophisticated and subtle field of magic. You have to manipulate a completely normal mirror at the same time you trap the target in your spell. It's said to be one of the most difficult spells to pull off.

"Not only must you control the magic of the spell itself, you must also force your target to surrender to your will."

"Surrender to your will?"

"You gotta dominate them mentally. This spell is used in the Kingdom's Courthouse and the Order of Knights to both compel criminals to confess and to determine the truth of witness testimony. It's a very sophisticated type of magic."

"How do you make the target 'surrender'?"

"Hm? Oh, that—all you have to do is make them think, even for a second, that *you* have the upper hand in the situation. Make them quiver in self-doubt, just for a moment."

Professor Bordon is giving us all a rather cruel grin of anticipation as he says this.

"Well, that should be easy."

One of the nearby students seems quite confident that he can perform this spell successfully.

"Oh really? Think you can do it? You don't know if it's easy until you try. Even if you force a mental surrender, there are a ton of other things you need to pay attention to."

If you pay too much attention to overwhelming your target, you'll forget to pay attention to ensuring the spell is properly cast on the mirror.

"Right now, I'm going to pass out one mirror to each pair. Use it with the person next to you."

In front of the teacher's podium is a brown box. I'd wondered what was inside, but once the teacher lifts up the lid I can see that it's filled with dozens of round mirrors, which come floating out of the box and into the air. With another gesture from the professor, those floating mirrors fly to our desks, one for each pair of students.

I snatch the mirror that is floating down towards Rockmann and me with one hand.

"Ugh..."

'The person next to you.' In other words, I have to work with him.

After four years of sitting next to each other, we had gotten used to situations like this, but still, I can't help the fact that I want to click my tongue in disgust at the prospect of having to work with this idiot, yet again.

After the professor taught us the words and gestures needed for the incantation, we were instructed to attempt to cast the spell on the person sitting next to us, both at the same time.

With a direct instruction like that from the professor, I wouldn't be allowed to protest. Up until a moment ago I'd kept my knees turned as far away from *him* as possible, but at the professor's command I slowly, reluctantly, turn so that my whole body faces the guy to my right.

I don't want to admit this out loud, but there's a high probability his spell will work on me. I've never seen him fail to cast a spell, not once. Somehow, I've managed to keep up with him and haven't screwed up my spellwork in class yet, but still... I can feel the stares of literally every other student in the classroom turning around to look at us. Every single time we have a class like this, they seem to think that the two of us will be able to pull it off, no matter how difficult the spell. Even Prince Zenon, who's sitting at the desk directly in front of us, doesn't even attempt to conceal his interest as he turns around to look at Rockmann and me.

"Gotta force your opponent to surrender, huh?" Rockmann has a rather vicious glint in his eyes. "I'll be generous enough to cast the spell first, then."

How typical of him. "Well, don't I have you in the palm of my hand! There's no

way I'm going to let you use that spell on me!"

Rockmann lifts one eyebrow at me as he points his index finger in the air, spinning it round and round. He looks completely relaxed. *Just how does he think he's going to succeed in casting that spell on me? And why does he have such a disgusting smile on his face? Probably thinking of some awful question. This guy really pisses me off.*

"Okay, so, face me."

"Hmph."

This is a spell that requires eye contact, so I turn to face Rockmann. I don't really want to see his stupid face, though, so I keep my eyes closed.

"Um, could you, like, actually look at me?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever..."

"Don't speak to me in that tone of voice."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever..."

There's no way I can get out of this. Slowly, I open my eyes, and look at Rockmann. Technically I am looking at Rockmann's eyes.

His eyes are, as ever, a sharp contrast to my own, his crimson red pupils flashing back at me. *Fire-types must have a lot of reddish physical characteristics, because Maris is a Fire-type as well, and she has red hair. Now that I think about it, Benjamine has a reddish tinge to her hair, so it must be a unique trait to Fire-types...* or so I am thinking, allowing myself to get mentally sidetracked as I stare into those crimson eyes.

"*Paguraata, paguraata.*" (Open your heart, open your mind.)

Rockmann begins to chant the incantation and turns the mirror to face me. He's staring right back into my eyes and looks like he is taking this all quite seriously.

"*Parageetedouuna.*" (Your spirit is mine.)

Each time he chants the incantation, his golden hair, which looks as though it was just cut yesterday, flutters a bit above his shoulders.

“Hey, look at me, properly.”

“I *am* looking.”

I am *absolutely* not going to let him pull this off. The professor had said that there were other elements necessary for the spell to succeed, besides achieving a sort of mental domination of your target, but I think Rockmann, more so than any other student here, has what it takes to cast this spell.

If I continue resisting him, that means the spell won't take. As long as I believe I am either just as good or better than this guy, I have nothing to fear from him.

I am better than you, I am better than you, I am better than you... I repeat those words in my mind as I glare at Rockmann.

“...What an ugly face you're making,” he says, finally.

“Stuuuupid. I'm not going to fall for that.”

He's begun teasing me, so without the slightest hesitation I retort back at him. *He's probably trying to get me angry. As if I'd be done in by such a juvenile strategy.*

All my efforts must have been worth it, because finally, after several long moments, he gave up. He'd failed to cast the spell on me.

“It's pointless trying to use psychomagic on the Ice Idiot. She's far too stubborn.”

You betcha. As if anyone else would surrender to you anyway!

This isn't the first time he's called me “Ice Idiot,” so I'm going to let that slide this time, generous victor that I am.

“So there are some things you're bad at, aren't there, Alois?”

Prince Zenon, who's been watching us this entire time, is laughing at the sulky expression on Rockmann's face. I'd like to join in with a high-pitched laugh of sneering superiority of my own, but I'll hold off on that until I finish casting the spell on *him*. I ball my hands up into fists to pump myself up. I'm so giddy right now, looking at Rockmann, who failed to cast the spell on me, that I feel as though I might leap out of my seat and start dancing out of spite. *Although, if I fail too, I don't even want to think about what he'd call me then.*

“So it’s my turn next. Look over here.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever...”

You, idiot, were the one who said I shouldn’t speak in that tone of voice, or did you forget that? I push away the thought and try to calm my mind.

“Paguraata, paguraata.”

It’s unpleasant, but I force myself to look Rockmann in the eye once more. *Just who in the world wants to spend their whole day looking their worst enemy in the eye?* I try to rationalize it away, thinking, *I’m only doing this so that I can learn more about magic.*

While I’m reciting the incantation, however, I need to also be paying attention to the mirror—but right then, for a reason I can’t discern, something very banal crosses my mind:

“You are no longer... no longer...”

It’s what Benamine was mumbling to herself in her sleep this morning.

“You are no longer—a pig.”

What kind of dream must she have been having? Nikeh and I had quietly gotten out of bed early and sat quite close to Benamine as she muttered, bursting out laughing at her words. *It must be those red eyes of his that made me think of Benamine. Why else would that memory spring to mind right now?*

It’s easy to understand why I’m being distracted by other thoughts, lost in the color of those crimson eyes as I am.

“Hehe,” I giggle at the memory in the middle of my incantation. “Oops, I can’t think about that right now.”

Focus, Nanalie, focus on the spell. Rockmann is going to make you out to be an even bigger fool for giggling during the spell if you mess it up.

I know that this lack of focus is one of my major weaknesses, or should I say character flaws, and I reprimand myself for losing concentration—but then I realize there’s something odd about Rockmann’s appearance.

“Huh?”

His expression is frozen, as if time itself has stopped, not changing in the slightest. I try waving one hand in front of his face, but he doesn't react.

Have I just...? No, it couldn't have been that easy. That's ridiculous.

As a test, I try asking him something.

"What is your name?"

"Alois Hades Arnold Rockmann."

The one that responds is not Rockmann himself, but his reflection in the mirror. It's the deep voice of a man who's fully matured.

"Wow! Nanalie, you did it!"

Professor Bordon must have been watching us along with the rest of the students, because now he's clapping. I feel an even stronger interest in the stares from the other students now. Rockmann seems to have noticed their gazes as well, because somehow I can tell that he is extremely uncomfortable. His face is still frozen in its earlier expression, but somehow, I can tell he isn't enjoying this.

My jaw is slack at the fact that I've successfully cast a spell that Rockmann failed at.

"Hehehe, what kind of question should I ask...?"

"You've got an ugly face."

Rockmann's reflection has begun speaking again.

I get it. Essentially, he's always going around telling me exactly what he thinks of me, so even under this spell, it's no different. Whenever we fight or get paired up in class, it's always the same barrage of insults, and not much else. Still irritating, though.

One of the noble girls nudges me. "Hel, you know what to ask, right?"

"What's that?"

I'd been just about to ask Rockmann some random question, when I notice that some noble girl sitting diagonally across from me is looking at me with stars in her eyes. *Actually, all of the noble girls in the class are looking at me in the*

same way right now. What in the world is going on?

“Hel!”

Maris is calling out to me from across the room.

“Ask him about his taste in women!”

“He always dodges the question when I ask him,” another girl says, shaking her head.

“If all you ask is about his taste in women, I’m sure he won’t mind too much.”

Before, I’d been isolated, alone, the only commoner girl in a class full of nobles. Now all of them are cheering me on, getting up from their desks to come whisper suggestions in my ear. *Whatever happened to that “noble aura” they always try so hard to maintain?*

Professor Bordon tries to calm them all down. “Now now, girls, let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Not a single person pays any attention to him. He gives up, letting out a sort of pained laugh as he looks back to Rockmann and me.

“His... taste?”

His taste in women, was it?

Why would I ask him something so useless? I’d actually prefer not to know the answer to that question, but I can’t just dismiss the demands of all these noble girls so lightly. I’m too scared. I might even be terrified. I didn’t give in to Rockmann, but I am already surrendering to these noble girls and their whims.

“Okay, so... What’s your... taste in women?”

I feel a bit guilty as the words come out of my mouth. Rockmann is unable to resist my questioning, and remains as expressionless as before. I’ve been pressured into asking him this question by the girls who are now claustrophobically closing in around me, and I can hold them off no more.

“I like—”

The mouth of Rockmann’s reflection opens up as soon as I ask my question.

“I, like...”

It’s different from earlier—he’s not speaking as fluidly as he did before.

While the real Rockmann is exactly as before, with that frozen expression, I can see sweat dripping off the side of his head. The mouth and chin of his reflection is twisting and chomping at the air uncomfortably, looking as if it's trying to talk but someone is attempting to paralyze it with magic.

Is Rockmann using some sort of counterspell? It's a sort of strange state he's in, completely frozen in place by my spell physically, but apparently mentally capable of some resistance. I've never seen psychomagic used before, so I can't judge whether this is a normal state of affairs or not—perhaps the duration of the spell depends on the mental fortitude of the target?

Once you've been trapped by a spell like this, you shouldn't be able to escape from its effects unless some third party rips you out of the spell by force. I'd been so caught up in my excitement at having cast the spell that I hadn't noticed that it hadn't taken full effect. *Bit frustrating, really.*

"Dark... brown... hair..."

Barely, just barely, I can hear the reflection speaking.

"A bright... and cheerful..."

All of the noble girls, so as not to miss a single word of the reflection's tortured mutterings, have pressed their palms up against the back of their ears to hear even just a little bit better. But then—

—*Crack!*

"Ahh!"

The mirror that I've been holding has broken.

"Hah... hah..."

The spell must have been lifted the instant the mirror broke, because Rockmann is once again moving, pressing his hand to his forehead and gulping down huge lungfuls of air, as if he'd been trapped in some airless space deep underground.

He looks at the mirror shards on the desk, then at me, sparks of anger practically leaping from his eyes. He gives me this awful expression as he takes his index fingers and points them both at me. I can see flames sprouting from

somewhere just behind him, or so it appears in my peripheral vision.

“Glynyuudo.” (Inferno.)

“AHHHHH!”

My hair is covered in flames, and there it goes, bit by bit, up in smoke.

I’m not going to let him burn all my hair off! I cover my head with ice, extinguishing the fire. But the fight isn’t over—it’s just begun.

All of the students, seeing this spectacle, mutter in unison: “There they go again.” They draw even closer to watch, and now the boys are part of the crowd too. All of the girls are, of course, cheering for Rockmann, like they always do.

Professor Bordon doesn’t seem like he’s going to do anything to stop us. “Fight all you like,” he says, turning to sit down in the chair next to the teacher’s podium before quietly settling in for a nap.

“Oh my, look, it’s cleared up outside.”

“You’re right.”

What happened to all that depressing rain?

The brilliant sun peeks out from behind the clouds, and the Royal Isle is once again bathed in warm sunlight.

Bonus Short Stories

Second Year

“Is that the last of the luggage for the second years?”

Today we’re doing the annual deep cleaning of the dorms. The students take all of our furniture and belongings outside the dorm, and then the dorm mother uses magic to clean all of our rooms. With so many students bringing so much stuff outside, we have to put our things on specific spots on the lawn, grouped together by class year, and then by room number.

“You two—we have some time right now, do you want to organize our stuff?”

We don’t have any lessons today, so we have some time to kill while the dorm mother is cleaning our rooms. Just as Benjamine, Nikeh, and I are going through our belongings and discussing what we don’t need anymore, however, we’re interrupted by a high-pitched laugh from nearby.

“O-ho-ho-ho! Behold this lovely portrait of Sir Alois I commissioned *especially* from an artist!”

“My heavens, a portrait of him *sleeping*... Lady Maris, I don’t suppose you’d let *me* have that!”

Maris is showing off a large, framed drawing to the other noble girls. It’s so big she has to use both hands to hold it up. From what it sounds like, she had a portrait drawn of Rockmann while he was sleeping—without his permission. *I wonder how he would react to hearing about this portrait...? Not that I care how he feels, or anything.*

“That’s so cool! I wish I had a portrait of Satanás sleeping.” Benjamine and Maris seem to share the same preferences for artwork of their crushes. Benjamine’s biting down on her thumb in envy as she watches Maris parade around with the portrait. *Does everyone become like this if they like someone too much?*

I hear one of the noble girls getting a bit worked up over the portrait. “Lady Maris! Just one copy, Just *one copy* of that, please!”

“Sally, dear, stop—! Nala, kindly refrain from touching—!”

Barely three minutes have passed since Miss Maris brought out that picture, but the throng of noble girls is beginning to fight for possession of it, like a game of capture-the-flag. *This is absurd. Now some of them are even using magic! I can't say I understand why they're so desperate, but surely it can't be worth getting into a magical battle over, right?* Some of the girls have a stupid, cheeky little glint in their eyes as they cling to the frame of the portrait, yanking it this way and that. *At this rate, they're likely to rip it in half. How could any noble girl allow herself to participate in such a farce?*

“Um, yikes, that’s a bit concerning, don’t you think?” Nikeh’s brows are furrowed with worry as she points over at the commotion. One of the girls has apparently conjured a tornado—and it’s headed right for our belongings.

“Huh? Oh—ahhhh!” *Boom!* Our luggage goes flying to all four corners of the compass as the wind races through the area. *Ugh, this is the worst! Everything is everywhere!* I don’t have *too* many clothes, but still, it’s embarrassing to have them blowing all over the place.

“What d’you think this is?”

Right as I’m about to cast an attraction charm to pull everything back towards me, I hear Rockmann’s voice. On instinct, I whirl around to face him.

“‘This’ is, of course, all your fa—”

“Underwear?”

Rockmann is looking at some white underwear that he’s holding up with both hands. *My underwear. My underpants.*

Why do those girls want this guy's portrait? No good ever comes of seeing his face. I'll just have to get rid of the cause of all this stupidity: that dumb picture.

“ERASE!!”

But first I’ve got to erase this idiot’s memory.

Third Year

My favorite place at school is the library. I can find out whatever I want, anytime I want to. It's a magic place for me. Even if I'm there all day I never get bored, and there's nothing I like better than hiding away among the stacks of books on a rainy day.

Nikeh, Benjamine, and I are in the hallway. They laugh as they wave goodbye to me in front of the library doors. "Bye now, bookworm!"

"Oh, hey Hel."

Someone calls out the instant I enter the library.

"Danji, hey, it's been a while. Haven't seen you in here lately."

"Been busy having a friend help me practice summoning."

Danji Gert: a boy with chestnut hair

He's a student in the classroom next to mine, and a commoner like myself. He's one of the regulars here at the library, and I often see him here.

"You figured out summoning for yourself already?"

"Yeah, I can do it. My familiar's a white lynx."

It seems like he's been busy reading books on summoning today. At a large table meant for ten students, all I see are reference materials on magical creatures and summoning manuals scattered hither and thither.

"Uh, Hel, if it's not too much of a bother—mind teaching me some summoning?" Danji grabs my arm as I turn to walk towards the other side of the library. I'd planned on studying height increasing and gigantification spells today, but I guess that's not happening.

"I feel like I could pull it off, if you're the one that teaches me."

Danji looks completely serious as he says this. I sigh. *Well, how can I turn down an honest request like that?* I nod and shake his hand firmly. *I will make him a capable summoner.*

* * * *

“You know, Hel darling, I’ve noticed you’re getting along rather well with Gert recently.”

“Oh, is that so? Please Miss Hel, *do* tell us all about him.”

Lessons have finished for the day. I’m standing up from my seat when Miss Maris and some of the other noble girls come dashing over, apparently hoping that I have some gossip to dish out.

It’s been about two weeks since I began practicing summoning with Danji. Every day after school we head out to the field to have our practice sessions, and short of *literally holding his hand*, I am doing all I can to help him learn the basics. It’s more difficult than I thought it would be, and Danji often has this self-deprecating grimace on his face while we’re practicing. *Just a little more practice and he should be able to do it.* I’m going to head to the classroom next door to meet up with him so that we can walk out to the field together.

“All I’m doing is teaching him summoning,” I say, waving away their questioning.

“Oh, no need to be shy about it! Nanalie, you’ve *finally* discovered love for yourself, haven’t you? Isn’t that wonderful, Sir Alois?” Miss Maris tries to draw Rockmann, who’s still sitting down, into our conversation.

“Not sure how ‘wonderful’ that is,” he says. “If you really are trying to teach him, it shouldn’t be taking this long. Maybe you’re just a bad teacher?”

“What’d you just say!?”

Our eyes flash as Rockmann and I glare at each other. *What a despicable pair of eyeballs! There’s no point in just jabbering away here in the classroom with this fool.* “Hmph!” I turn my back to him and leave the classroom.

But then something happens the next day.

After school, I again head over to the neighboring classroom, and what should Danji do but tell me, with a big smile on his face, that he successfully managed to perform a summoning yesterday. *Well, isn’t that nice. But you weren’t able to do that during practice, so I’m a bit confused...*? I tilt my head to one side. He explains that last night, Rockmann visited his dorm room and, carefully and

patiently, taught him exactly what to do.

“You’re just a bad teacher.”

I spend the rest of the day shut up in the library.

Fifth Year

“Love potion?”

“Yeah, someone mixed it in.”

Or so Prince Zenon tells me from his seat in front of my desk, looking completely serious.

Next to me, A Certain Guy is sitting with a cloth blindfold over his eyes. *It’s a guy, sitting next to me, which means that the person with the blindfold on is Rockmann.*

The morning had so far been just like any other, but upon entering the classroom, I noticed that it was *quite* a bit louder in here than usual. A mob of students had gathered around the teacher’s desk at the front of the classroom. Between gaps in the crowd I catch glimpses of what appears to be Satanás wrapping a blindfold around Rockmann’s head. *What in the world...?* My face unconsciously screwed up into a frown of confusion as I look on.

“Sometime early this morning, a girl from the year below us asked to come into the classroom. I think she’s from a family of equivalent rank to Duke Rockmann’s household. She said she wanted to give Rockmann some cookies, so Maris let her inside...”

When the girl gave him the cookies, she apparently said she wanted him to eat them “right now.” Rockmann, of course, isn’t the type of guy who can refuse a direct request like that from a cute girl, so he’d done as she’d asked and ate them. But then—

“It sounds like he saw some thin, red vapor float up out of the cookie he’d bitten into.”

Rockmann had understood immediately that some sort of drug had been mixed into the cookie—how he knew that wasn’t clear, gut instinct, perhaps—

and immediately closed his eyes. Miss Maris and the other girls inside the classroom found the smoke rather suspicious and began interrogating the girl, who panicked and made her confession: she had laced the cookies with a love potion.

“Drink the potion, and the first person you see of the opposite gender shall become the object of your affection.”

The girl had been escorted out of the classroom. The other girls in the room screamed bloody murder at her until she was out of sight, apparently, but they’ve calmed down somewhat now that our first lesson of the day has finished and are stealing glances at Rockmann. Unfortunately, magic that occurs as a result of a potion cannot be undone by a spell, only by the antidote potion, and the girl had not prepared one. Because of that, the teachers are currently busy preparing the antidote, according to Satanás.

But on an occasion like this, doesn’t anyone think it’d be better to leave him walking around blindfolded all day? As punishment for his sins? Perhaps I should try wrapping it around his head a little tighter... I have an evil grin on my face as I sneak my hands up towards the cloth of the blindfold. The Prince has a suspicious look in his eyes as he watches me.

“Hehehe—ah, uh oh?!”

Despite my caution, the blindfold falls right off. *I barely touched it with one finger!* As a result, Rockmann, who’s been so careful up until now, makes eye contact with me. *Oh dear. I bet all the girls who’ve been watching him this whole morning have witnessed exactly what I just did.*

“He!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Ah! Oh no, I’m sorry!!!!!!”

All the girls in the classroom leap out of their seats and glare at me with positively *demonic* rage contorting their features. It’s too late to help now, but I work to refasten the blindfold over Rockmann’s eyes. *They’re gonna kill me.*

“What a *racket* you’re all making. Would you mind quieting down just a little?”

Rockmann slaps away my hands, tossing the blindfold onto the floor.

“Ouch!! Oh, hold on...the love potion didn’t work?”

He looked at me, right? But he’s acting the same as he always does. All of the students are staring at us with their jaws dropped in disbelief that Rockmann just hit me.

“That love potion must’ve been a dud.”

Prince Zenon looks closely at Rockmann. He shakes his head. “A dud,” he agrees.

Good grief. What a morning.

Sixth Year

There are many kinds of magic. Among them, of course, are an abundance of spells that can be used for pranks.

“Awawa—”

I look up at everyone else. They’ve all gotten bigger. *No, I’ve gotten smaller. But not just smaller, I’ve also gotten younger. I can’t even speak properly.*

Professor Bordon walks over to my seat, picks up my little body with his hands, and sighs. “It’ll take a whole day to reverse this.”

Today’s lesson covered how to mix medicinal potions for healing different types of injuries. We weren’t in our usual classroom, but the laboratory. Our seating chart hasn’t changed, however—even with five students to a group, I am still somehow sitting next to Rockmann.

I’d carefully mixed my potion exactly as instructed. Professor Bordon told us to exchange potions with someone else in our group. I’d switched with the boy sitting across from me and drank his...but then:

“Yugirsto, you’ve gone and made an Infantilizing Draught!”

“Sorry, Hel!”

The boy Yugirsto looks distraught as he apologizes to me. I feel like reaching out and patting his head in forgiveness, but I can’t do that from where Professor Bordon is holding me in the air, and on top of that, my arms are too short to

reach. *He didn't do it on purpose, I know that.* I can't even tell him it's alright because my mouth won't form the words. *From the outside, I'm guessing I look like I'm one or two years old.*

"Aha! Nanalie, you are so *adorable!*"

Miss Maris and a few other noble girls gather around Professor Bordon and reach out to touch me. *Maybe they're just fawning over me because they're being controlled by their maternal instincts, but I must admit I enjoy this outpouring of unconditional love. Having said that, I'd much rather go back to how big I was before. I can't even use magic to fix this in my current state!*

"A full day, sir?" Rockmann had until now been sitting quietly, observing the situation.

"Yeah, probably. If it was a charm it'd be one thing, but the effects of a potion are different. No matter how skilled the mage, there's no one who can instantly reverse this."

Rockmann looks at me pityingly as I wave my arms in the air, still being held up by Professor Bordon. His eyes aren't those of someone sympathetic, however—his expression looks more like one would have upon looking at a distinctly pathetic individual.

It's unbelievably insulting that he gets to see me like this. Not helping the matter is the fact that Professor Bordon is now leaning me against his shoulder and patting my back, rocking me gently as if I really am some sort of baby. I feel my cheeks flush in embarrassment. My clothes, of course, have not changed with my body, and remain their original size. Little as I may be, I am gripping the cloth of my shirt as tightly as I can to prevent it from slipping off. *Even though I have the body of an infant, I will not let him see me naked.*

"Nanalie, you're gonna behave and spend the day in the nurse's office, got it? Rockmann, could ya take her there?"

Professor Bordon looks down at me in his arms as he says so.

Hold up, Professor! Why would you choose him, of all people?!

"Understood, sir."

You bastard! Just what have you “understood” about this situation?!

Ah! Stop it! Don’t pick me up! Don’t hold me in your arms! Don’t pat me on the back with that smirk on your face—!!



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The Sorcerer's Receptionist: Volume 1

by Mako

Translated by Roko Mobius Edited by Linda Lombardi

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